

# ***Parting Ways***

**News and Views on UMC Disaffiliation**

**from *United Methodist Insight***

**Jan. 1, 2022 - Sept. 30, 2022**

# Foreword

One of the frustrations in reporting on The United Methodist Church since 1988 is that the issues and events which seem so important to the denomination's movers and shakers rarely filter down to the grassroots majority in pew and pulpit. This painful reality has spurred the creation of this resource from content published on *United Methodist Insight* from Jan. 1 through Sept. 30, 2022.

Those who've been most involved with the disaffiliation campaign – the break-up of the 50-year-old United Methodist denomination – may criticize this compilation as "too little, too late." Obviously, we don't hold to that view, mainly because the splintering of The United Methodist Church came to a head in May 2022, when the traditionalist Wesleyan Covenant Association launched the Global Methodist Church.

***Insight's* comments and emails through September 2022 have made it abundantly clear that many rank-and-file United Methodists still don't understand what's happening with disaffiliation. They've had so much misinformation thrown at them that they don't know what or who to trust.**

As of this compilation, dozens of local congregations have voted to disaffiliate this year, but few of those departures become official until annual conferences vote to approve each congregation's disaffiliation agreement. Paragraph 2553 of the Book of Discipline, the mechanism approved by the 2019 General Conference for leaving the UMC, "sunset" on Dec. 31, 2023. Several annual conferences have set up special meetings during Fall 2022 to review disaffiliations, and there's still annual conference season 2023 for more such approvals, along with the possibility of special called conference sessions in Fall 2023.

We sincerely wish it were possible to codify disaffiliation in a few words, or even a few bullet lists. Unfortunately, the situation presents no easy explanations, hard as many on both ends of the United Methodist political spectrum have tried to reduce the dispute to its bare bones. Instead, we've tried to identify the most succinct and clear expressions of the disaffiliation debate and include them here.

**One caveat: The content presented here focuses on another sad reality, namely the misinformation campaign conducted by traditionalists – predominantly the Wesleyan Covenant Association – has so warped the disaffiliation debate that the bulk of these articles seek to debunk lies used by the WCA and its companions.** That makes this content suspicious and even false to many traditionalists. In this regard, we make no apologies for what has been presented by our many contributors, since we also have verified the falsehoods used by disaffiliation forces.

Those desiring even more details beyond this resource can conduct their own online searches using the words "UMC disaffiliation *United Methodist Insight*." This should lead to the vast array of news and views available on our website. Be prepared for a lengthy search, however; collecting raw material for this resource resulted in 479 letter-sized pages of content!

We wish to thank the many contributors who have allowed *United Methodist Insight* to publish or republish their content. These writers range from well-informed laypeople to pastors to academics to church bureaucrats and bishops. We hope their articles create a detailed, authentic picture of the United Methodist landscape.

As the Editor and Founder of *United Methodist Insight*, I can genuinely say that UMC disaffiliation has been the most challenging topic on which to write, report and edit of my 50-year career as a journalist. Ironically, I started as a professional journalist the same year that the creation of The United Methodist Church finally was completed. As a United Methodist layperson, disaffiliation also has been the most heart-breaking prospect of my life as a Christian of the Wesleyan tradition, as I've heard from dozens of church members whose lifelong congregations have been torn away from them. I sincerely hope this compilation will benefit the many readers who've asked *Insight* for our help in understanding the path to United Methodism's future.

We don't know where we'll end up as we journey through this season of unraveling, but with our founder John Wesley we can nonetheless affirm, "Best of all, God is with us!"

Cynthia B. Astle

Editor and Founder

*United Methodist Insight*

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# Introduction

***By Cynthia B. Astle***

As of Fall 2022, The United Methodist Church finds itself in a season of disintegration.

Formed in 1968 by the merger of the Methodist Church with the Evangelical United Brethren Church, the United Methodist Church formally was completed by the 1972 General Conference. Since that time its existence has been fraught with a seeming binary battle between what we now call "traditionalists" and "progressives" over biblical interpretation as it's applied to Christian living. This has been focused mostly on the acceptance of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and "queer" people – typically abbreviated as LGBTQ – in the life and ministry of the church.

Many traditionalists will contend they are fighting against the "sin" of "homosexuality," but medical science since 1972 has made boundary-breaking strides regarding human sexuality. In truth, the first insertion of a doctrine against "homosexuality" at the 1972 General Conference was aimed specifically at gay men, who were then asserting their human rights. In many cases today, those who oppose LGBTQ inclusion continue to focus their "biblical" stance on "homosexuality" against gay men -- even though the word "homosexuality" didn't appear in the Bible until the Revised Standard Version was published in 1948.

Looked at rationally, the debate that has led to division in The United Methodist Church more accurately can be termed a fight over authority and control. Traditionalists and progressives alike claim their method of interpreting scripture is "correct," while "centrists" have only emerged within the past decade as those attempting to find a middle way that could balance both extremes. The last attempt to do so came in 2019 through a proposal called the One Church Plan, which sought to give control over biblical interpretation to annual conferences and local congregations rather than General Conference. The One Church Plan failed by a mere 58 votes at the special called 2019 General Conference. Instead, a majority of delegates approved a version of a "Traditional Plan" that tightened the UMC's bans on ordaining LGBTQ clergy, allowing same-gender marriages to be performed in United Methodist congregations (even though allowed legally in many countries) and removing the 1972 doctrine that "homosexual practice is incompatible with Christian teaching."

The backlash to the 2019 General Conference vote was earth-shattering among U. S. annual conferences. Nearly 75 percent of U.S. conferences enacted some form of rejection of the General Conference vote, either through resolutions or by electing new progressive slates of delegates to the planned 2020 General Conference.

Then, as a showdown loomed for 2020, the global coronavirus pandemic hit, and the church along with the world shut down.

Since then, the debate has simmered and sometimes boiled over. During Summer 2019, the late Bishop John Yambasu of Sierra Leone brought together representatives of various special-interest groups to try to work out a compromise to keep the UMC united. In Fall 2019 it became apparent that no compromise was possible. Instead, a renowned international negotiator, Kenneth Feinberg, was brought to help craft the unthinkable: a way to allow congregations to leave the UMC for reasons of conscience regarding LGBTQ acceptance.

That document, titled "A Protocol of Reconciliation & Grace through Separation," was hailed as a way finally to halt a half-century of acrimony in the UMC. However, the Protocol was not universally accepted.

First, it was negotiated without any representation from United Methodist leaders outside the United States save for some bishops. This led to the development of an alternative proposal known as the Christmas Covenant, that sought to maintain UMC unity by decentralizing authority for decisions on human sexuality, intending for such doctrines to be contextualized according to cultural norms in the Philippines, Eurasia and Africa.

Second, the Protocol contained a provision for the UMC to provide \$25 million in seed money over four years for the establishment of a "traditionalist" denomination. A sum of \$2 million was allotted for the development of "other expressions" of Methodism. The financial arrangements drew outrage from progressive groups, leading to allegations that the \$25 million was, in effect, "ransom money" to get traditionalists to leave the UMC.

Sadly, in August 2020, the original architect of the Protocol negotiations, Bishop Yambasu, was killed in an automobile accident on a rain-slickened highway outside Freetown, Sierra Leone, while on his way to preach at the funeral of a United Methodist clergyman. His driver survived the crash but was permanently disabled. With Bishop Yambasu's death, the movement for an amicable separation lost its spiritual leader, and the division in the UMC sank into even more acrimonious conflict.

The COVID-19 pandemic also played havoc with attempts at amicable separation. The 2020 General Conference was first delayed to 2021, then to 2022 and finally to 2024 as coronavirus exacerbated existing problems with obtaining visas to enter the United States. The last postponement was the final straw for the six-year-old Wesleyan Covenant Association, which by 2022 had surpassed previous conservative caucuses as the primary special interest group for traditionalists. In March 2022 the WCA announced that it wouldn't wait any longer to start its own denomination, dubbed the Global Methodist Church.

The May 1, 2022, launch of the Global Methodist Church touched off a wave of disaffiliations across the UMC. As of the preparation of this resource, nearly 700 U.S. congregations out of some 30,000 local churches have voted to leave the UMC. All of these votes, along with their exit plans, must be approved by their annual conferences to become official.

What follows in this resource are articles from *United Methodist Insight* that describe the longstanding debate in the UMC over

- who or what controls the interpretation and application of biblical principles to today's Christian living, especially as it pertains to human sexuality;
- whether the Protocol, which must be approved by General Conference, remains a viable instrument of separation;
- how the United Methodist Church should operate.

Ironically, while traditionalists still frame the conflict as a defense against the incursion of sinful homosexual lifestyles into the church, the UMC's LGBTQ bans contradict the views of 80 percent of Americans, according to several widely accepted research organizations. The arguments presented most often center on authority and control, not what goes on in the privacy of someone's bedroom.

In many ways, the splintering of The United Methodist Church reflects the polarization of American politics and society. Thus far the UMC has been unable adequately to apply Jesus' instructions on resolving conflict from Matthew 18 in order to remain united despite divergent views. This is the heart of the disaffiliation movement as it exists as of September 2022.

May the resources herein guide discernments in all congregations that use them.

# The Process of Disaffiliation as Simple as We Can Make It

Here is a bare-bones rendition of the process of leaving The United Methodist Church, thanks to Ask The UMC, the information unit of United Methodist Communications.

**1. Your congregation doesn't have to do ANYTHING if it doesn't want to leave the UMC.**

2. If your congregation's leaders want to disaffiliate from the denomination, here are the basic steps:

- A. The pastor and church leaders inform the annual conference of the desire to disaffiliate. Conferences have set up their own individual timelines for how to proceed.
- B. Information meetings should be held before a vote on disaffiliation to give details of what it will cost your congregation in financial terms to leave the UMC. Each congregation must pay to leave the UMC. The basic procedure requires your congregation to pay two years' worth of your "fair share" contributions, known as apportionments, for ministries beyond the local church and 110 percent of what you pay for clergy pensions for two years. This often runs into thousands of dollars and many churches don't have that kind of cash in savings.
- C. A congregational vote must be convened and should be supervised by your district superintendent. In some cases, the bishop may be present or preside at the vote.
- D. The vote to leave the UMC must total two-thirds of the members present and voting. If the vote falls short, the congregation stays United Methodist.
- E. If your congregation votes to leave, your membership doesn't transfer anywhere automatically. You can remain United Methodist if you wish by transferring to another congregation – hard as that might be emotionally.
- F. Leaving the UMC isn't complete until your annual conference votes to approve your congregation's exit plan, which includes a schedule of how you will repay the conference for the money it advanced for the congregation when it was founded.

Some other quick notes:

**The United Methodist Church isn't "pushing out" traditionalists. They're leaving of their own accord.**

**The UMC isn't going to give up its orthodox beliefs in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.**

These and other doctrines can be found in the Articles of Religion in the Book of Discipline, the collection of United Methodist laws and doctrine. The Articles of Religion are protected by a

rigorous voting process that makes it extremely difficult – almost impossible – to change or remove them.

**The basic process for disaffiliation is found in Paragraph 2553 of the Book of Discipline.** Your annual conference is allowed to add more requirements it deems necessary.

## The Church is Splintering, not Splitting

*By William B. Lawrence*

March 31, 2022 | CHAPEL HILL, N.C. (UM News)

### Key points:

- **Framing the denomination’s situation as a “split” suggests we are dividing into two groups. That frame distracts from the true picture.**
- **The disaffiliation process voted on at the 2019 General Conference means that churches are instead splintering in a variety of directions.**
- **This is not the first time that the splinters of Methodism have strewn themselves around the landscape of church history.**

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For a number of United Methodists, what is happening right now in the denomination is being framed as a “split.” Unfortunately, a frame may get more attention than what it encloses. And that can be a bad thing. A cheap frame can diminish the beauty of a fine sketch. A gaudy frame can distract focus from what is in the picture. If a frame is not visual but verbal, a florid phrase can make a complex moral issue look different, or a headline can misrepresent a report.

Recently, for example, the members of an adult Sunday morning class at a large church in Texas received an email from their class president, who wrote, “The long-anticipated split in The United Methodist Church is now happening.” The email urged class members to attend a session led by one of the congregation’s pastors about this “split.”

But framing the church situation as a “split” suggests we are dividing into two groups. That frame distracts from the true picture. What is happening in The United Methodist Church is not a split. An announcement that some new “Methodist” denomination will begin on May 1 is not evidence that a “long-anticipated split” in United Methodism “is now happening.” That is just a distracting frame.

The United Methodist Church is not splitting into two parts. More likely, it is splintering.

There are many dividing lines in the denomination that began 54 years ago. We remain racially divided, though we formally desegregated in 1968. We affirm our global unity but struggle with our global diversity. We disagree about public policies, such as who should be the final decision-maker regarding abortion, whether governments should provide health care for all, and whether homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching. Many of these matters are in our Social Principles as topics for inspirational discussion, not institutional division — for pastoral reflection, not for dividing followers of Jesus Christ into “faithful” and “false” disciples.

But some frames force issues into politicized terms. A phrase can put a topic in political rather than pastoral language and misdirect focus. In 2000, for instance, the General Conference added to the Social Principles the politically loaded phrase “partial-birth abortion,” a term that is not a procedure in medical practice but a partisan form of emotional rhetoric. It became a new frame for our Social Principles, forcing a complex moral matter for pastoral conversation into a type of political combat.

That is also the error in using the word “split” to describe the situation in our church now. In a “split,” separating parties assemble their assets and divide them. It happens when a married couple divorces, when a professional business partnership dissolves and when composers who co-wrote a piece of music decide to end their collaboration. The parties that “split” settle their differences by agreeing on how to “split” what they share.

Such things have happened in the church at times. When the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States “split” over slavery in 1844, northern and southern Methodists spent more than a month at the longest General Conference in Methodist history trying to decide how to “split” the human and material resources of American Methodism.

However, at other times, the church has broken piece by piece. The splinters were strewn in many places. What is happening in United Methodism now is another splintering.

By a disaffiliation process that the General Conference enacted in 2019, congregations are leaving The United Methodist Church by requesting and receiving the approval from their annual conferences to depart while retaining their property and their financial assets. They are splintering in a variety of directions. A church in Alabama is fleeing to the Free Methodist Church. And a church in Houston joined the United Church of Christ. Still others are seeking to become independent congregations.

And these procedures only apply to the local churches. Clergy are individual members of their annual conferences. A pastor who is appointed to a local church that is disaffiliating faces a different situation in the splintering process. Even if the pastor agrees that disaffiliation is what that local church should do, the pastor’s membership in the annual conference (and that pastor’s ordination or license for ministry) is not part of the disaffiliation process.

Pastors who support their local churches’ departures but who choose personally to remain United Methodists in the annual conference will receive new appointments. Pastors who want to leave the denomination must either withdraw from conference membership and surrender their ministerial credentials, or they must request transfer to another church or denomination.

United Methodism is splintering. Congregations and clergy are scattering in different directions. The members of the adult class in the Texas church who received a message that a “long-anticipated split” in United Methodism “is now happening” would have learned (if they had attended the pastor’s presentation) that their local church is not leaving the denomination.

We are splintering, not splitting. But that does not mean one is less bad than the other.

Nor is this the first time that the splinters of Methodism have strewn themselves around the landscape of church history.

A short distance from the home in Chatham County, North Carolina, where my wife and I have settled as retirees, is a lovely building known as O’Kelly Chapel. It traces its history back to 1792, when a Methodist preacher named James O’Kelly urged the General Conference to adopt a motion that would have allowed preachers to appeal their appointments to the conference if they felt aggrieved by the place to which Bishop Asbury was sending them. O’Kelly’s motion was defeated. He and several other Methodist preachers then left the conference and formed a new denomination called “the Republican Methodist Church.”

Here and there, one can still find a few congregations calling themselves “Republican Methodists.” Such splinters are strewn. But O’Kelly did not remain a Republican Methodist. He joined the Congregational Church, which later merged into the United Church of Christ.

The building that bears his name now sits on land owned by the United Church of Christ. It is managed by a local garden center, which uses the property for its gardening operations and rents “O’Kelly Chapel” to private individuals and groups for weddings or other social functions.

But it is no longer a church. It is just one of the splinters that have been strewn around, as they are every time the followers of Jesus Christ decide that they cannot tolerate a community of faith centered in a prayerful unity under one Lord, despite differences. Today, United Methodists are adding more splinters to the residue of unfaithful and broken discipleship.



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# State of the UMC in 1000 Words, Parts, 1, 2 and 3

**By Jeremy Smith**

*As the Rev. Jeremy Smith sees it, the only hope for a viable UMC after schism is for the "hard hearts" of traditionalist leaders to break open to compromise that will allow the remnant to truly thrive and grow.*

The following are 1000-word attempts to describe the current state of The UMC in a succinct manner that admittedly over-simplifies things with broad brush strokes. Nonetheless, it will be a useful set of primers for people to enter the conversation. Think of these as the **Ghosts of Methodism Past, Present, and Future**.

## Part I: Power & Polity versus People & Places

### United Methodism at a Glance

The United Methodist Church occupies a unique place in America and on the world stage.

The UMC is a global, mainline, evangelical Church. It sits at the intersection between evangelical (baptists, etc.) and mainline (the [Seven Sisters of Protestantism](#)) movements, drawing the best elements from them both. On the global stage, it has a unique composition: progressive and traditionalist people together under a global democratic representative polity with episcopal governance.

At one time it was the largest denomination in America—now it is third behind the Roman Catholics and Southern Baptists, with the Latter-day Saints (Mormon) Church not far behind.

The Methodist tradition, which began in the 18th century, had gone through many schisms, reunions, branches, and offshoots before its largest entity finally settled on its current form of The United Methodist Church in 1968. It's right about then that we need to look back at two movements within the church that led to our situation in the UMC today.

### An open table...eventually

A diverse church with many different traditions and shifting power dynamics has had to deal with minority groups seeking equality within the church. The UMC has previously come to terms with including minority groups into the Church and emerged better for it with both mainline and evangelical qualities.

Progressive, Moderate, and Conservative people [worked together](#) to advance the rights of women to become clergy (1956) and to fully include African American pastors (1968). Make no mistake, these were far too late and hard-fought to achieve, denying ministry to people groups for decades, and even then, implemented incrementally. Against both votes, there were Traditionalist groups who had opposed the inclusion of women [and black pastors](#), but by the dates of these votes, their influence had waned because women's suffrage and black civil rights movements in civil society predated these votes on in church society.

These two acts of inclusion made United Methodism, at the time, one of the largest and most inclusive denominations in America—it *still* is the largest denomination affirming women's ordination. And all of Methodism, especially Methodism globally, has benefitted from these two acts of inclusion.

### **Traditionalist Reaction to “Minority Mania”**

But those two acts of inclusion of women and African Americans were too much to bear for the Traditionalist element in United Methodism, which began to organize to stop the alleged [“minority mania”](#) of an ever-expanding table of grace. Rather than leave the denomination like Alabama Methodists who created [the Southern Methodist Church](#), they created their own shadow denomination within The United Methodist Church in order to weaponize fears of progressives and inclusion, particularly of the LGBTQ+ community.

With the messaging foundation laid by the Good News Magazine (1966), The Institute on Religion and Democracy (IRD) (1981), and others, Traditionalists began creating a parallel reality within the UMC but *outside* of United Methodist oversight, accountability, or connectional leadership. Through the Mission Society ( [1984](#) parallel to the General Board of Global Missions), Bristol House Books ( [1987](#) parallel to Abingdon), and the RENEW network ( [1989](#) parallel to UM Women), traditionalists created their own parallel structure that provides books, fellowship, events, and missionaries for congregations to support. Within these structures, Traditionalists have free reign over curriculum, theology, and incentives to contribute to their own causes instead of United Methodist ones, siphoning off money and organizing power to themselves.

This shadow denomination's coordination and messaging has borne significant fruit within the denomination: every General Conference (the Congress-like doctrine making body of The UMC) since 1988 has been a [majority of conservatives](#). Through two subsequent acts of gerrymandering of the General Conference representation, even the massive progressive wave of delegates to the 2022 General Conference is expected to be unable to reach a majority at the next General Conference at the end of August 2022.

### **Carving out Breathing Space**

While the Traditionalists were seeking **power** and **polity** control in The UMC, Progressives have been carving out **places** to save **people's** lives.

Beginning with the Gay Men's Caucus (aka Affirmation) in the 1970s, early acts of promoting the inclusion of LGBTQ+ persons, and continuing with strategy of organizing congregations under the [Reconciling Ministries Network](#), LGBTQ+ inclusion efforts are about proclaiming who and where are safe harbors for queer United Methodists. As well, by electing conference and jurisdictional leadership that reflect full inclusion of LGBTQ+ persons, progressives have grown top-to-bottom full inclusion in the Western Jurisdiction—and sizable majorities in the Northern jurisdictions as well.

This is significant because United Methodist Polity places accountability and organizing at the local and annual conference level. The Wesleyan tenet of local accountability—enshrined, ironically, by the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, when they merged with MEC in 1929 to [ensure the South would not be led by Northern bishops](#)—meant that the progressive jurisdictions and annual conferences could continue their [regional practice of full inclusion](#) of LGBTQ+ persons despite what General Conference legislates. Regional authority and accountability is part of the Constitution, requiring a super-majority to change—votes that the Traditionalists do not have.

Progressives and Centrists have a minority in the General Conference, but their regional majorities mean there are sizable sections of United Methodism where full inclusion is practiced and celebrated.

### **The Withering Storm around 2022**

As we anticipate a General Conference 2022, we see these two long-term directions are at a stalemate.

- Traditionalists won battle after battle for the UMC, including the most recent Traditional Plan passed in 2019, but they lost the war—they are perpetually unable to drive out, bring to heel, or eradicate progressives from The UMC. The polity the Southern conservatives put in *themselves* has led to an unsquashable progressive minority. But the harm continues: Traditionalists are expected to have a majority at the next General Conference and can continue to [keep us in the trenches](#) and make it more retributive over the 10 day conference like they did in 2016.
- The progressive/centrist wave won't have a majority to change the polity, but the American delegates are poised to elect a whole class of inclusive bishops in every jurisdiction, which will put back the Traditionalist goals of finally "[owning](#)" the Council of Bishops at least 8 years. An episcopal covenant to "do no harm" that ceases trials and prosecutions in the South is within reach (even if they have to overcome current bishops who [prosecute by inaction](#)), leading the majority of the UMC in America to be inclusive by practice even without an inclusive polity, though it won't be sustainable globally.

The two sides in United Methodism care so much about winning that we're about to lose everything. In our next article, we'll examine what's been happening in our interim time during the pandemic, and why United Methodists need to care for the next year until the 2022 General Conference.

## Part 2: The Present: In the Meantime and the Mean Time

### The UMC is stuck “In the Meantime”

Since the [delay of the 2020 General Conference](#), the United Methodist Church has been unable to gather due to COVID-19 concerns, but also because of intentional choices by our executive leadership. This has had serious ramifications for the viability and witness of our denomination.

The United Methodist Church is structured like the United States government, with three branches. And like the US government at many times in history, all three branches are *not* functioning optimally for the good of the people.

### Executive Branch: Bishops and General Agencies

- As of January 1, 2022, instead of 66 active bishops serving The UMC, there will be only 54. Those in left-out episcopal areas will be “additional appointments” to already-serving bishops or appointments to retired bishops. Several bishops have also delayed their own retirements, serving beyond their expectation. You can see the executive leadership is very stretched at the moment: 34 active bishops in America with 53 Annual Conferences.
- As well, General Agencies have been unable to fill empty director seats because the jurisdictional conferences have not met to assign the replacements. Fewer directors means fewer wisdom and energy in their boardrooms. They’ve also cut staff, including [positions that benefit BIPOC ministries and missions](#).
- However, instead of calling for jurisdictional meetings to elect new bishops and executive board membership, the Council of Bishops has [rebuffed appeals](#) by democratically elected delegates to call those meetings. Because of this, the executive branch of The UMC has shrank even as its expectations continue, especially to “adapt everything” to COVID-shaped ministry.

### Legislative Branch: General and Jurisdictional Conferences.

- Make no mistake: the delay of General Conference 2020 was the right call. However, as shown above, the delay is unprecedented in that it doesn’t allow the usual processes of accountability and action and prophetic witness to take place in those gatherings, much less debate [the Protocol](#).
- Even in the progressive Western Jurisdiction, a planned jurisdictional conference where we would have voted on [4 substantial reforms of the Western Jurisdiction](#) has not been called in November as previously told to delegates and I’m told it will now be well into 2022. Even then, there’s no Disciplinary guarantee the reforms will even get a hearing until regular 2022 gatherings after the 2022 General Conference.

## Judicial Branch: The Judicial Council

- There's a [very good argument](#) that because GC hasn't replenished the member terms that ended, the Judicial Council no longer has a quorum, and thereby cannot issue any judgments. Judging by their lack of high-impact cases [on their dockets](#), I think they know this and are choosing cases of lower concern.
- Even if that were not so, the Council of Bishops has not forwarded to the Judicial Council any requests for declaratory decisions about whether called Jurisdictional Conferences can elect bishops. The Council can't give The UMC clarity because nothing is being sent to them.

By the above summary, the UMC is truly stuck, but only half of the blame lies with COVID-19 delays and deferrals. The rest lies with the bishops who refuse to allow the rest of the UMC to respond by their pocket veto of jurisdictional leadership.

## The WCA saved themselves “In the *Mean Time*”

As we [named last time](#), progressives and traditionalists are locked in a stalemate with neither party able to achieve their goals. To remedy this, Traditionalists like the [Wesleyan Covenant Association](#) are seeking passage of the Protocol ([read more here](#)) that would net them \$25 million and an exodus of property and endowments to jumpstart their breakaway denomination “The Global Methodist Church.” No other schism of Protestantism (PCA, ACNA, etc) has begun with such an influx of cash, and Traditionalists in the UMC are determined to be the first—by hook or crook.

While the UMC is stuck in neutral, the Wesleyan Covenant Association, free from 2+ centuries of denominational accountability and episcopal oversight, has held in-person gatherings at annual conferences and on global missions trips (and few with masks, as judged by the live-streamed content). Freed from having to figure out local church ministry under COVID *like the rest of us*, traditionalist staff persons have been able to jetset and recruit and fundraise without restriction.

This lobbying effort has yielded some claimed successes. The WCA has taken advantage of the delay and the inaction by the bishops to lobby and prop up the Protocol, which would get them \$25 million dollars. The [North Alabama WCA Chapter believes](#) if the vote was in May 2020 as expected, the Protocol would have failed. Now, they have much more confidence.

The delay of the General Conference has saved The WCA from losing at their own political game, and now it is anyone's guess whether the WCA propaganda campaign for the Protocol will tip the scales.

## Losses of clergy and churches

So that's the top-level view. What about the rest of the church?

“**The Great Resignation**” has definitely taken effect in the clergy. I’m still waiting for an empirical study, but the number of young clergy and clergywomen on my friend lists that are leaving ministry is incredibly disturbing. *All with great reasons*, but the aggregate seems larger than in previous years. Add to that the early retirements and denominational uncertainty stunting young clergy recruitment, and there’s a huge stress on conferences to recruit, retain, and deploy clergy. Conservative conferences take this crisis as an opportunity to appoint baptist pastors to their churches even as they continue to put roadblocks in front of progressive lifelong Methodists (although as a former Oklahoman, this isn’t a new thing!).

Entire churches are also “resigning.” In 2020, [UMNews](#) and [Christianity Today](#) report that 51 churches left The UMC. While they report a smaller number for midway through 2021, an October 2021 summary compiled from annual conference reports by [Tara Barnes with United Methodist Women](#) counts **117 church disaffiliations in 2021: twice as many as 2020**, which itself was the high water mark in recent years.

While not all disaffiliations were traditionalist ([multiple progressive churches left New England in 2021](#), for example), it *is* odd how some of those exiting congregations are large benefactors of the Wesleyan Covenant Association: it’s almost like **they want the smaller churches to stay in to tilt the scales, while the WCA insiders themselves get out before the calculus changes**.

In short, while finances and institutions continue, local churches and pastors have borne the brunt of COVID-19 even as traditionalist groups lobby for the money, almost as if COVID doesn’t impact their everyday life the same way as everyone else.

## **The Future: Avoiding the Fundamentalist Future Set Before Both Sides**

While the above image looks like the history of [The UMC’s schisms and mergers](#), it’s actually from the [Disney+ Marvel show \*Loki\*](#), a show that involves time travel: whenever someone goes back in time and changes something, it can create a “variant” branch (*variant* is a poor choice of words amidst today’s COVID variants but it’s their terms) from the timeline like the image above. Keeping variant futures from causing trouble for the preferred future sets up the major conflict in the show.

Both progressive and traditionalist elements in United Methodism are trying to keep variants and variables out of their preferred futures:

- **Traditionalists** are trying to avoid the fate of other mainline schismatic movements before them by starting out with money and property that would allow them to shape culture through people power and political influence like [fundamentalist influences outside of the Wesleyan tradition](#). The GMC and the Protocol are their last, best hope.

- **Progressives** are trying to avoid the fate of other sister mainline denominations that turned into smaller, like-minded traditions—that continue to affect change and grow disciples, to be sure, but no longer shape culture through people power and political influence. A more inclusive and just United Methodism continues to be that preferred future for most.

Each side is trying to achieve their preferred future: the WCA by getting an infusion of cash, and the progressives by aligning the mission and institution movements together. Let’s outline a few considerations then see what could lead us to the best future together.

### The Problem: the Biggest Whopper the WCA ever told

Longtime readers know I’ve been [following the Wesleyan Covenant Association for a long time](#), chronicling their rise at a level unmatched by other bloggers. So when I say I found the biggest whopper they’ve ever said, trust me it’s true. See the screenshot?



The above quote by Rev. Thomas Lambrecht of the Good News movement—that traditionalists want the UMC to be “set up to succeed, rather than fail”—is in stark contrast with the [2004 strategy document that Rev. Lambrecht himself penned](#) that details why Traditionalists ought not leave a “strong” UMC behind. *This document also provided the baseline for their successful strategy at the 2019 General Conference, which backfired spectacularly and would have ran them out of options except the coronavirus happened (see analysis here).*

In every corner of traditionalists online, it is anathema to the Traditionalists to give The UMC anything to stand on. The house must be gutted before it is sold in the divorce. **The libs must be owned.**

We see this has played out in the Protocol because traditionalists refuse to allow The UMC to restructure to become its best self. The disappearing act of brokered and agreed-upon [regionalization](#) from the published protocol is the best gift the authors could have given to the traditionalists: though supported behind closed doors, it didn’t make the public face and therefore doesn’t have to now be supported by traditionalists to pass the Protocol.

Traditionalists have looked to the future and repeatedly said they will not vote for anything that violates their values other than the Protocol. Even UMC structural changes like the [Christmas Covenant](#) (that says *nothing* about LGBTQ+ inclusion) are not supported. By their documented actions, they have no interest in allowing United Methodism to be “set up to succeed” in any form—only that their bank account has \$25 million in it when they go to cash the check.

### **Progressives without...Progress**

Traditionalist obstinance to voting for something they object to—but won’t have to live with—is notable because **they are asking progressives to do the very thing they object to.**

Progressives are being asked to vote for a Protocol that gives \$25 million dollars to fund ecclesial abuse of LGBTQ+ persons for years to come. But almost worse than that is progressives have a troubled path ahead because **the Protocol won’t actually create anything new for them.** Many progressives may be okay getting with a Traditionalist exit via the Protocol (even though that would leave the gay children of Traditionalists more vulnerable and with less support), but their exodus doesn’t mean full inclusion is achievable—indeed, the opposite.

If the voting and decision structure stays the same, progressives will *still* not have a majority vote globally, leaving us in the same situation as before, just \$25 million dollars spent for no effect. But progressives will still be able to carve out inclusive spaces like previous decades. The denomination will not be set up or reformed in any way to be more inclusive unless there is regionalization [like the Christmas Covenant](#) included in any such reform.

### **Two variants ahead**

If the WCA wants to put their votes and money where their mouth is, then they’ll need to publicly support one of two efforts:

- The best scenario out of this is a compromise: passage of the Protocol linked with regionalization (the [Alaska Omnibus is an example](#)). This would mean the Traditionalists get their money, and America would be able to create their own polity that is not up for a vote by regions outside the USA—and vice versa. No tricks or “vote for this and we’ll vote for that” shenanigans. That would put both GMC and UMC on their best possible ground for their future: **a unity in uniformity for the GMC, and a unity in diversity for the UMC.**
- The second effort is “[A Call to Grace](#)” ([recently affirmed by the North Central Jurisdictional conference](#)), that calls for bishops to allow churches to leave without financial penalty beyond pension obligation. While this would open the floodgates to a ton of churches leaving without serious financial penalty and create a church-by-church strategy for the GMC, it’s a best case scenario for both sides that simply want movement somewhere rather than waiting to 2024. *I’m not supporting it right now—just naming it as a viable effort.*

Compromising and allowing the UMC to become their best self is likely supported by rank-and-file conservatives—and recent polls indicate a larger-than-expected share of “*Compatibilists*” in

the UMC. But the traditionalist-elected—and paid—leadership strongly oppose it. So it remains to be seen if a reasonable compromise will come forth.

## Your Turn

The future is in doubt. Two antagonistic sides can leave and restructure at the same time. The Reformed Church of America recently approved congregations to [disaffiliate alongside church restructuring](#). But The United Methodist Church is stuck without a way to the preferred future because of the ghosts of its recent and distant past (see previous articles on this series).

As much as I hate to say it, the future depends on conservatives and traditionalists breaking open the hard hearts of their leaders and allowing a true “set up to succeed, not to fail” future to come forth. Progressives will continue to be the minority in any future, so we keep on doing the hard work of transforming minds and shaping sanctuaries for the oppressed and cast out.

***Addendum:** One leftover problem is what to do about the bishops. Since the delay of the 2020 General Conference to 2022, the United Methodist Bishops have [withheld the ability to gather to elect new bishops](#) from the duly elected representatives. A few years ago, I would have said this is a very convenient way to keep the progressive wave from electing a new slate of uniformly-progressive bishops, much like Congress denying the vote on a Supreme Court justice. But today, well, **I’ll still say it is true for some bishops**, but the collective purpose is to streamline the number of bishops so the next iteration of Methodism doesn’t do away with the institution of the episcopacy entirely (or neuter them like in the GMC), and so the current bishops will have more authority—at the cost of new, vibrant leadership at agencies and the episcopacy. **This will be a longer term, structural problem to fix.***

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*The Rev. Jeremy Smith serves as senior pastor of First United Methodist Church in Seattle, Washington. This post is republished with permission from his blog, Hacking Christianity.*

# What Centrists Need to Know about the Proposed Global Methodist Church

By Darryl W. Stephens

Traditionalist United Methodists are making plans to launch the [Global Methodist Church](#). This would be their new church home upon leaving The United Methodist Church (UMC). Heather Hahn, assistant editor of United Methodist News, has written a helpful [background article](#). What do centrists need to know about this proposed denomination?

To answer this question, I have examined their *Transitional Book of Doctrines and Discipline* ([updated October 10, 2021](#)), which offers a glimpse of the kind of church imagined by members of the Wesleyan Covenant Association and their allies. This denominational blueprint provides a lot of detail, grist for debate, but there is also a lot unstated. One could easily get into the weeds of itinerancy, sacramental privilege of deacons, election and term of bishops, educational requirements for ordination, no trust clause, the definition of “valid Christian baptism,” exclusively masculine language for God, and of course the pages and pages of judicial administration. Steve West does a good job naming the most critical features of the *Transitional Book* in his [open letter to Chris Ritter](#). I will focus on what I consider to be the most problematic issues: control, privilege, and patronage.

**Control.** Conservatives in the UMC have long lamented the theological pluralism of this denomination. Through church law and judicial enforcement, they have fought to reign in a denomination considered out of control. The *Transitional Book* serves as a corrective. First and foremost is an emphasis on right doctrine. The first few pages of this 103-page document emphasize orthodoxy, “settled doctrines and discipline,” canon, creed, authority, protection, preservation, fidelity, and accountability. The book provides “constitutive standards” as “a bulwark against false teaching” (para. 106).

How are true teachings discerned? There is no Wesleyan quadrilateral to be found in the *Transitional Book*. Scripture is touted not only as containing “all things necessary to salvation” (UMC Article of Religion V) but is also considered “the primary rule and authority for faith, *morals, and service*” (para. 104). Scripture is the moral rulebook. Apparently, the bulwark requires more than scripture, though, as adherents must affirm and are held accountable to the doctrinal standards and moral statements. The paragraphs of Social Witness assume a “consensus vision transcending cultures” when interpreting and “affirming a scriptural view of sexuality and gender,” for example (paras. 201–202). Not surprisingly, this “scriptural view” consists of heteronormativity, marriage, and a gender binary: “We believe that human sexuality is a gift of God that is to be affirmed as it is exercised within the legal and spiritual covenant of a loving and monogamous marriage between one man and one woman” (para. 202.7). Gender is “defined throughout this *Transitional Book of Doctrines and Discipline* by a person’s immutable biological traits identified by or before birth” (para. 306).

This attempt to provide a culture-free “consensus vision” ignores the multivocal witness of scripture as well as science. While admitting a role for scientific knowledge, “we encourage dialogue between faith and science as mutual witnesses to God’s creative power” (para. 202.4), the Global Methodist Church’s understanding of sexuality and gender seems uninformed by science. This impression is confirmed a 22-page document produced by the Wesleyan Covenant Association’s Task Force on Sexual Brokenness ([December 2021](#)). The writing team set out “seeking the wisdom of our God who is love through Scripture and our Wesleyan heritage.” The Traditionalist understandings of sexuality and gender, as explained in these documents, has nothing to do with science. Instead, the writers asserted what they call “our Christian sexual counterculture” in the face of “the clash of cultures between the Kingdom and our earthly surroundings” (pp. 8–9). This stance begs the question, Who are the arbiters of this Christian counterculture?

**Privilege.** The interpretation of scripture and tradition controlling the Global Methodist Church and its members’ moral behavior is shaped by white, US privilege. The Social Witness statement in the *Transitional Book* provides clues. It does not speak as the poor; it speaks about the poor (who are presumed not to have Jesus). There is no solidarity here. There is a presumption of privilege when offering Jesus, alms, and protection to the “less fortunate” and “those who may be powerless to protect themselves” (paras. 201–202).

The presumption of privilege is no accidental feature of the *Transitional Book*. Privilege is an inherent feature of the Traditionalists’ proposed denomination. The Wesleyan Covenant Association’s offer to provide vaccines to non-US delegates to General Conference is an example of this harmful mentality. Likewise, US privilege is enshrined in the *Transitional Book* through its funding for bishops (para. 505). All bishops’ salaries in this proposed, global denominational would be paid for by US funds.

This is a white, US project infused throughout with the trappings of hetero-patriarchal privilege and a need for control. All of the authors of the members of the Task Force on Sexual Brokenness are white people from the United States. The drafting team for the *Transitional Book* consists of only white men from the United States. This is an alarming starting point for anyone who takes seriously the racist past of white Protestant America as a sinful part of our history as Methodists.

**Patronage.** Conservatives are protecting more than their version of theological orthodoxy. They are also conserving a system of privilege and patronage with deep neo-colonial roots. Folks considering joining the Global Methodist Church must consider where they fit within this power structure—economically, politically, and morally. Will the protection and authority of the Transitional Leadership Team serve their best interests?

The answer will likely depend on the ways in which they benefit from US, hetero-patriarchal, white privilege. There are many in the UMC—both in the United States and abroad—who want to preserve their relationships of patronage and privilege, and Global Methodist Church promises a way of doing so.



*The Rev. Dr. Darryl W. Stephens, an ordained United Methodist deacon and seminary professor, examines the proposed Global Methodist Church's organization from the standpoints of control, privilege and patronage. He relates to Grandview Church, a progressive congregation.*

## A Letter to Centrists

**By Darren Cushman Wood**

Dear Centrists,

As a progressive, I celebrate that you are standing up and speaking out against the Traditional Plan. You have amazed me with your success in getting centrists and progressives elected to General Conference. What we progressives tried to do for years, you have made real progress this year. It has been a successful political coalition.

But our coalition is not tidy. We are in a time of transition and even the labels we use reflect the messy ambiguities of the moment. The traditionalists scratch their heads and wonder what the difference is between a centrist and a progressive. So do I. In fact, by the end of this letter I might need to use another label such as “liberationist.” And I have no problems being called “queer.” None of us like being called “incompatibilist.” So, you can call me almost anything—just as long as you call me for supper!

As I have listened to you talk—and you talk a lot—here are some things I want you to stop doing and start doing:

- **Stop using the slash in “Centrists/Progressives.”** It implies that we are more united than we really are. What happens is that the distinctive perspective of progressives is drowned out by centrists. I know you are not doing this on purpose, and it is so easy to do because our focus is on our shared opposition to the Traditional Plan.
- **Start giving us time and space to develop our vision and strategic interests.** Just because we have a common enemy does not mean we share a common vision for the future or even the same reasons for opposing that enemy. We progressives need more time to organize among ourselves.

- **Stop characterizing progressives who feel called to leave and start a new denomination as intolerant extremists and ideological purists.** For me, the progressive non-negotiable is the *immediate* full inclusion of LGBTQ believers. What is unclear is how the 2020 General Conference should do this: immediate and uniform changes in the UMC; give birth to a new progressive denomination; create safe space within the UMC for the evolution of such a denomination; or create safe space for progressives within the UMC until the rest of the denomination is ready for full inclusion. Regardless, my desire is not driven by ideological purity but my missional pragmatism. My appointment is to North UMC, a large urban multi-staff church, and East Tenth UMC, a small urban neighborhood church. North's membership includes many LGBTQ members for whom the fight is over and they want to get on with envisioning a new Methodism. North's mission field is Indiana Youth Group, a city-wide LGBTQ youth program, and Trinity Haven, a soon-to-be transitional housing ministry for homeless LGBTQ youth. Every day that passes with us being identified with this denominational battle hurts our outreach. As for East Tenth, I have deployed a pastoral team to serve them, but I lost a team leader because he is a gay millennial who is unwilling to endure the ambiguities and abuse of the UMC. My "extremism" is driven by missional necessity.
- **Start listening closely to progressives.** Many of you scoffed when you read what UM Forward said about you in [\*Loved and Liberated\*](#): "The greatest threat to queer liberation is centrism, not conservatism." You don't have to agree with that assessment, but do not dismiss it as irrational anger. I did not have a hand in writing the proclamation and I would not have used its rhetoric, but I agree with the fundamental ideas of UM Forward's proclamation and there is much truth in their analysis.
- **Stop assuming that for progressives the problem is only 8 paragraphs in the *Book of Discipline*.** The issue of sexuality is inseparably intertwined with a host of other problems in the denomination such as racism, clericalism, corporatism, and size. You cannot solve the problem of sexuality without revamping other parts of our polity that perpetuate these other problems. For example, the problem is not ordination alone, but the combination of ordination and guaranteed appointment and an itinerant process that is trapped in a clergy-centric bureaucratic structure. For progressives, it is not good enough to have a United Methodist Church with a few tweaks. Could it be that the underlying difference between centrists and progressives is that centrists are more institutionalists and progressives are early adapters?
- **Start focusing on a new vision for Methodism.** "Stay and resist" has served us well, but now is the time to focus on the good fruit that should yield. Envisioning new expressions of Methodism is the right conversation we should be having.



*The Rev. Darren Cushman Wood, senior pastor of North UMC in Indianapolis, Indiana., wants those who see themselves as "centrist" United Methodist to understand the full scope of progressives' concerns and actions.*

# Global Methodist Church Unveiled

**By Walter Fenton**

*The Wesleyan Covenant Association's Transitional Leadership Council, a 17-member team of theologically conservative Methodists, has released plans for a new denomination called the Global Methodist Church. This article is by the Rev. Walter Fenton, Vice President for Strategic Engagement for the Wesleyan Covenant Association and an elder in the Greater New Jersey Annual Conference. This article is republished with permission from the Wesleyan Covenant Association website.*

*March 1, 2021*

The Transitional Leadership Council, a 17-member team of theologically conservative Methodists, has released information on the [Global Methodist Church](#).

The council said the new church will officially come into existence when a United Methodist General Conference adopts the implementing legislation for the [Protocol for Reconciliation and Grace through Separation](#). Alternatively, if it becomes apparent that the leading bishops, centrists, and progressives who covenanted to support the Protocol no longer do so, then the council will consider bringing the new church into existence without delay. Local United Methodist churches, annual conferences, and central conferences will then be able to join the new denomination.

“The primary mission of the Global Methodist Church will be to make disciples of Jesus Christ who worship passionately, love extravagantly, and witness boldly,” said the Rev. Keith Boyette, who serves as chairman of the Transitional Leadership Council. “Over the past year the council members, and hundreds of people who have informed their work, have faithfully and thoughtfully arrived at this point. They are happy to share with others a wealth of information about a church they believe will be steeped in the life giving confessions of the Christian faith.”

With the announcement of the new church the council authorized the release of a comprehensive and detailed [website](#). It includes the new church’s mission statement, vision, information about its name and logo, a frequently asked questions section, and downloadable versions of the church’s *Transitional Book of Doctrines and Discipline* in English, French, Korean, Portuguese, and Spanish. The website clearly notes that “the Global Methodist Church is in formation” and will officially launch when the Protocol is approved, or if it becomes apparent that an amicable and orderly separation no longer has the support of a broad coalition of leading bishops, centrists, progressives, and traditionalists. In the case of the latter, the Transitional Leadership Council will consider bringing the new church into existence without delay.

“It was a great honor to participate in such exhilarating work,” said the Rev. Philippe Adjobi, a member of the Transitional Leadership Council, a district superintendent in the Cote d’Ivoire Annual Conference and a General Conference delegate. “I believe the Global Methodist Church

will fulfill the expectations and aspirations of local churches throughout Africa. They will appreciate focusing on what is essential: testifying to Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.”

Adjobi and the names of the other 16 members of the council are listed on the Global Methodist Church’s [website](#). They are theologically conservative women and men who come from Africa, Eurasia, the Philippines, and the United States. The list includes laity, clergy and bishops who have been integrally involved in the UM Church for years, and who believe an amicable and orderly separation is the best way forward for a denomination deeply divided and beset by significant challenges.

Theologically conservative United Methodists have made no secret of their efforts to form a new church. In late 2018, the Wesleyan Covenant Association created a Next Steps Working Group to begin drafting its own “Book of Doctrines and Discipline” outlining essential theological confessions and governing structures for a new church’s consideration. It did so in light of the special called 2019 General Conference, where delegates once again addressed issues that have deeply divided the UM Church for decades. The special conference was called to hopefully resolve differences, but many believed it could just as easily reveal the necessity of separation.

The special General Conference proved to be as contentious and divisive as many people anticipated when a Traditional Plan reaffirming the UM Church’s sexual ethics, teachings on marriage, and ordination standards was approved. Progressive and centrist United Methodists in the U.S. denounced the General Conference’s actions and resolved to defy the global body vested with the sole power to speak authoritatively for the UM Church.

Within weeks, small groups of centrist, progressive, and traditionalist UM Church leaders, quietly and often haltingly began having conversations about plans for dividing the denomination. A group convened by the late Bishop John Yambasu of Sierre Leone and guided by the world renown mediator Kenneth Feinberg hammered out the Protocol and its implementing legislation. The 16 member team included leading UM bishops and representatives from the major advocacy groups representing centrists, progressives, and conservatives.

The Protocol team released its plan in early January 2020 and it quickly gained the sometimes hopeful and sometimes grudging support of United Methodists around the world. It appeared headed for likely passage at the denomination’s May 2020 General Conference.

In light of the Protocol a group of theologically conservative UM Church leaders met in Atlanta, Georgia, the first week of March 2020. The group included several traditionalist bishops, evangelical advocacy group leaders, and other clergy and laity who identified as theologically conservative. Over the course of three days the leaders agreed to an [expansive vision for a new Methodist church](#), and then nominated the members of the Transitional Leadership Council, assigning them the task of forming the new church.

“I am convinced the Global Methodist Church will be a vibrant, vital expression of Methodism in terms of its teachings and ethics,” said Dr. Bob Hayes, a Transitional Leadership Council member and Bishop in Residence at The Woodlands United Methodist Church in The

Woodlands, Texas. “As a fourth generation Methodist I am excited by a fresh wind of the Holy Spirit where I see God doing a new thing! God is creating a church rooted in Scripture and the love of Jesus, and he is calling us to participate with him. We’re not there just yet, but given our vision, our hope, and our perseverance, I’m confident we’ll get there!”

At the time of the Transitional Leadership Council’s formation, no one knew the Covid-19 pandemic would result in the postponement of the UM Church’s 2020 General Conference. Like many other UM Church leaders, the traditionalists who met in Atlanta anticipated the passage of the Protocol in May of last year and intended for the Transitional Leadership Council to form the new church and oversee it until it could hold a convening General Conference.

Despite the postponement of an in-person General Conference, the Transitional Leadership Council has been meeting almost weekly since March 2020. As is evident in its *Transitional Book of Doctrines and Discipline*, the council has approved the Global Methodist Church’s core confessions of faith, hammered out a transitional governing structure, and adopted the new church’s name and logo. The council has emphasized fidelity to the historic teaching of the Christian faith, and a desire to be a truly global church.

“I believe a good number of ethnic congregations will want to align with the Global Methodist Church,” said the Rev. Kevin Ryoo, a council member and an elder in the Dakotas Annual Conference. “They long for a church which honors the Bible, stays within the traditional mission of Methodism, and keeps local church ministry as a first priority. I know Korean Methodist congregations have a strong passion for evangelism and mission.”

A number of Korean UM pastors reached out to the Wesleyan Covenant Association not long after the association’s formation and have offered their insights and ideas for what a new theologically conservative church might look like.

Boyette, who is the president of the Wesleyan Covenant Association, acknowledged that while the association has played a role in preparing for the new church, many other traditionalist leaders have been critical in the formation of the Global Methodist Church.

“Traditionalists do not march in lock-step,” said the Rev. Dr. Leah Hidde Gregory, a Transitional Leadership Council member and a district superintendent in the Central Texas Annual Conference. “Some traditionalists have been wary of the WCA, thinking it was moving too fast and others believing it was moving too slow. It took a few meetings before I realized there were only three people from the WCA leadership on our council. It became obvious to me that the group who nominated us wanted to make sure all people who regard themselves as traditionalist, orthodox, conservative, or evangelical were represented on the Transitional Leadership Council.”

Hidde Gregory also noted the misinformation that has swirled around the work of forming a new traditionalist church. “It’s unfortunate that some people have falsely claimed we are opposed to the full inclusion of women as clergy in a new church; nothing could be further from the truth. We make very clear the new church will be fully open to women, and to all ethnicities and races.”

In the “Frequently Asked Questions” section of its [website](#) the new church states, “Women, like men, will be called to serve in the Global Methodist Church and will be entitled to serve at all levels.” The section also says, “As a truly global church the denomination will be ethnically and racially diverse and will insist on the equal treatment of all the church’s members.”

Council members believe that if the Protocol’s implementing legislation is adopted, thousands of local churches and clergy in Africa, Eurasia, the Philippines, and the U.S. will want to join the Global Methodist Church. It is widely recognized that clergy and laity in Africa, Eastern Europe and Russia, and in parts of the Philippines are more theologically conservative than their counterparts in the U.S. Although, even in the U.S., a significant percentage of laity identify as theologically conservative, and are part of small, midsize, and large traditionalist local churches.

“I believe Methodism is on the cusp of another Great Awakening,” said Transitional Leadership Council member Cara Nicklas, an attorney and General Conference delegate from the Oklahoma Annual Conference. “The Global Methodist Church is the vehicle by which that will happen because we value a connectional, global church with doctrine and discipline that is not guided by our U.S. culture but is simply focused on bringing people into a deep and intimate relationship with our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”

The Transitional Leadership Council will continue to prepare for the official launch of the Global Methodist Church. It meets on almost a weekly basis and regularly receives extensive reports from task force groups dealing with everything from the necessity of a local church’s board of trustees to theological statements regarding the sacraments of baptism and holy communion.

“True to our roots, we’re a patient and methodical people,” said Boyette. “We want to do our very best to help theologically conservative local churches, laity and pastors navigate the transitional period as smoothly as possible. And then we look forward to the Global Methodist Church’s convening General Conference where we hope the duly elected delegates will find what we have done to be helpful. It will be their great task and responsibility to discern God’s will and so help all its local churches and people live fully into the body of Christ.”

To learn more about the Global Methodist Church, click [HERE](#).



*The Rev. Walter Fenton serves as vice president of strategic development for the Wesleyan Covenant Association. This post is republished with permission from the WCA website.*

# Not the Centrist and Progressive Views I Know

A Response to Thomas Lambrecht's 'Primary Reasons for Separation'

**By Adam Hamilton**

*Founding pastor of United Methodist Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kansas, the Rev. Adam Hamilton, a self-styled "centrist," refutes the description of United Methodist centrists and progressives and their theological differences given by the Rev. Thomas Lambrecht, executive vice president of Good News conservative caucus, in Good News magazine.*

It's been quite a year for all of us. COVID, protests against racial injustice, and a polarizing election. As a pastor, there seemed little time this year to focus on denominational division when we were trying to care for our members and serve our community in the midst of the crisis. United Methodists in many cities across the United States — conservative, centrist, and progressive — worked together to serve our communities together. In 2020, we focused more on what united us than what divided us.

But as I read Thomas Lambrecht's article, "[Primary Reasons for Separation](#)" in the [Good News newsletter, Perspective](#), I was reminded by Tom of the case he's made for some to leave The United Methodist Church to form a new Wesleyan denomination. He noted that "the differences between the 'sides' ... are so deep and so entrenched that staying together is unthinkable for many."

As I read Tom's post, at a number of points where he described centrists and progressives, contrasting their beliefs with traditionalists, his comments seemed misleading, not representing the United Methodist centrists or progressives I know. I don't believe it was Tom's intent to mislead; the article represents his understanding of centrists and progressives. And there may be individual United Methodists who hold these views. But I don't believe his characterization of the beliefs of most centrists and progressives is accurate. I'm writing as a centrist, offering another perspective, one that I think aligns with most centrist and progressive United Methodists I know. You can read Tom's original article [here](#). I'll use his headings to make it easier to follow along as I offer some counterpoints, clarification, and, at points, agreement with his words.

## Source of Beliefs

Lambrecht writes that, "traditionalists and evangelicals within United Methodism" focus on "the primacy of Scripture to establish our church's beliefs and teachings." He then notes that tradition plays a role, along with personal experience and reason in interpreting Scripture, "but the source of our beliefs is the clear teaching of Scripture."

I thought Tom's point was interesting because what he described as the views of his "side" is what nearly every United Methodist I know believes about Scripture, namely, that Scripture is primary in determining what we believe, and tradition, reason, and experience are secondary. This is not a distinctively WCA or Good News approach to Scripture, it is a United Methodist approach to Scripture.

He went on to contrast this with the view of “many centrists and progressives” that “sees the tradition of the church and particularly contemporary knowledge (their definition of experience) and the application of human reason to be equal with Scripture as sources of our beliefs.” I don’t know anyone who sees tradition, experience, and reason as equal to Scripture. I’m not suggesting such persons don’t exist, but they do not reflect the majority of United Methodists nor will they reflect United Methodism post-separation.

Lambrecht continues, “In [Albert C.] Outler’s misconstrued interpretation of Wesley, when modern knowledge contradicts our understanding of Scripture, we must change our understanding of Scripture.” At times, modern knowledge *should* lead us to change how we read Scripture.

Let’s consider a few examples.

In the 17th century, Galileo was imprisoned by the Church for championing Copernicus’ view that the earth revolved around the sun. This view was considered heretical, for such a view was thought to run counter to the clear reading of scripture. Eventually the Church embraced a heliocentric understanding of our solar system and, as it did, the Church’s view of scripture, and what it taught about the cosmos, changed.

As late as the 1700s, most leading Christian thinkers believed that the earth was less than 6,000 years old. Sir Isaac Newton, a devout Christian, theologian, astronomer, physicist and mathematician, suggested the earth was formed in the year 3998 BC. This came from a certain understanding of scripture and how one might read the genealogies and other dates found within the text. Today, few United Methodist clergy and laity believe the earth is only 6,000 years old. But to accept an earth that was billions of years old required a change in how Christians read and understood scripture.

Lambrecht continues, “this willingness to abandon (by some) or reinterpret the teaching of Scripture to match current societal understandings,” is the underlying mistake of those who accept same-sex marriage and ordination of gay and lesbian people and warns that it “also holds the potential for any number of other accommodations to cultural assumptions.” Here he quotes the adage, “Whoever marries the spirit of this age is destined to be a widow in the next.”

Throughout history changes in interpretation of scripture, leading to changing beliefs or practices in the Church, have led to claims that the Church was accommodating the culture and surrendering scriptural truth or authority. Some examples are humorous. As indoor plumbing was embraced in America, there were Christians and churches who refused to allow indoor toilets, pointing to Deuteronomy 23:12-14 where Moses insisted that latrines be dug outside the camp, lest God turn away from his people. Bringing toilets inside the church building was considered cultural accommodation. Other examples are much more serious.

Pro-slavery pulpits in the mid-19th century made what they felt was a compelling case that slavery was a part of God’s ordering of society. Slave, slaves, and slavery are mentioned over 700 times in scripture (modern translations soften the Hebrew word for “slave,” *ebed*, using instead the word “servant”). Though Israelites were once slaves, they were allowed to own

slaves. Slave owners were allowed to beat their slaves with rods, with impunity, provided the slave did not die within two days of the beating, “for *the slave* is his property” (Exodus 21:21 NASB). Even early Christians continued to own slaves. To capitulate on slavery was to favor the spirit of the age over the clear teaching of scripture. Yet despite slavery’s prevalence and acceptance in scripture, Christians came to reject slavery as contrary to the will of God. Was it the “spirit of the age” and “current societal understandings” that led many Methodists of the 18th and 19th centuries to reject slavery, or the Spirit of God and a willingness to question and reinterpret scripture?

Some saw the movement to allow women to vote, to own property, and ultimately to be ordained as pastors as a reflection of the “spirit of the age” and cultural accommodation. The movement to ordain women in the Methodist Church required a reinterpretation of scripture, particularly Paul’s words. To this day, this practice is seen by some as a capitulation to culture. Albert Mohler, President of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, recently noted concerning the ordination of women that “the real issue is biblical authority.” Mohler rejects the idea of women preaching (at least in audiences that include men) and women serving as senior pastors and thus having “authority over a man.” He and others like him see this as as cultural accommodation at the expense of scripture.

I don’t believe Methodists who supported women’s ordination or the end of slavery or who were willing to rethink their understanding of scripture in the light of modern science were “cultural accommodationists.” I would suggest they were reading and interpreting scripture with the help of tradition, their experience of the witness of the Spirit, and reason. I am certain Lambrecht would agree.

### **Self-determination vs. God’s Revelation**

Tom writes, “Most centrists and progressives value self-determination as the deciding factor in one’s view of oneself. This is connected to the postmodern idea that there is no such thing as absolute truth, but truth is defined by each person for themselves.” None of the United Methodist pastors I spend time with would agree with Tom’s words. Instead, they would say that the determinative source of our identity as Christians is Jesus Christ.

Anyone who has ever prayed the Wesleyan Covenant Prayer has seen their identity and life purpose not in the self, but in service to Christ: “I am no longer my own but Thine. Put me to what you will. Rank me with whom you will. Put me to doing, put me to suffering. ...” I begin each day yielding my life to Christ. I suspect most traditionalist, centrist and progressive pastors do the same. We do not see self-determination as “the deciding factor” in our view of ourselves.

I’m also dubious of the claim that “most centrists and progressives” reject the idea of absolute truth. ***That is simply not true.*** Most United Methodists—conservative, centrist, and progressive—would agree that God is absolute Truth, that Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. That the Holy Spirit leads us into all truth. And that Scripture bears witness to God’s truth. As it relates to Scripture, we also saw above that Scripture needs to be interpreted with the help of tradition, reason, and experience.

Tom also mentions that centrists and progressives assume “that what ‘is’ is what ‘ought’ to be.” Again, this is false. In most progressive and centrist pulpits I’ve heard, there is a regular call to repentance. As we prepare to begin the season of Lent, we focus once more on repentance. Repentance is essential because of our fundamental belief that *what ‘is’ is NOT what ought to be*. This is true when it comes to injustice, racism, materialism, sexism and a host of other isms. It’s true when it comes to dishonesty, lust, pride, and greed. Often, we are blind to our own sin. With Tom I agree that Jeremiah 17:9 offers an important word in our day, “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?” (NIV). This applies to centrists, progressives, and also to conservatives.

## **Different Agendas**

In the opening paragraph of this section Lambrecht states, “The centrist/progressive agenda is an unapologetic social-justice agenda. Promoting “inclusion” has become the highest value of official United Methodism. The left wing of the church appears to believe that the church’s main purpose is to “transform the world,” often through political action in line with liberal political causes.”

Should we not all be unapologetic in pursuit of justice? We all know Micah’s famous words, “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do *justice*, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8 NRSV, emphasis added). The Hebrew word “justice” is *mishpat*. It appears over 400 times in one form or another in the Hebrew Bible. It is often understood in scripture to refer to fairness or equity for the marginalized—widows, orphans, immigrants, the poor who can easily be taken advantage of, those whose rights might be dismissed by courts or kings, people who are often powerless. This is not the only meaning of the word, but it is often the meaning we see in the Hebrew Bible.

I know Tom believes this as does every United Methodist I’ve ever met. In fact, this is part of what drew me to The United Methodist Church while a theology major at Oral Roberts University back in the fall of 1982. It was the way the evangelical gospel and the social gospel were seen as two sides of a coin: loving God with one’s whole heart, soul, mind, and strength *and* loving one’s neighbor as you love yourself.

Tom mentioned that “inclusion” has become the highest value in The United Methodist Church. I don’t know that this is the highest value for United Methodists. I think most United Methodists might turn to Paul’s closing words in 1 Corinthians 13 to articulate our highest values, “faith, hope and love” while noting with Paul “the greatest of these is love” (NIV). But inclusion is an expression of love and justice. Its opposite is *exclusion*.

Lambrecht mentions that “the left wing of the church appears to believe that the church’s main purpose is to ‘transform the world.’” I think Tom is right that there are some in The United Methodist Church who do see the church primarily in terms of community or global transformation, and these may miss Christ’s evangelical imperative and the call to individual conversion—the transformation through faith in Christ and the Spirit’s regenerative work. But again, that does not reflect the majority of United Methodist clergy or congregations. Tom goes

on to mention several hot-button causes about which United Methodists disagree and will continue to disagree after whatever separation occurs.

Lambrecht next writes, “For traditionalists, the transformation of the world is a consequence of making disciples of Jesus Christ, not the primary goal of the church. As people’s lives are transformed in discipleship, the world is changed.” I wonder if this is really an either/or proposition, or if the gospel is more both/and. We are to be used by God to make disciples of Jesus Christ. *And* we are to live the gospel, doing justice, practicing kindness, being the hands and feet of Christ in addressing the brokenness in our world. Centrists and most progressives I know believe we are to make disciples, and that authentic disciples will seek to be used by God to heal the world. The United Methodist Church, post separation, will continue to seek to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

Tom mentions the merging of politics and religion on the part of some on the left. Tragically the same is often true among Christians on the right. Our faith should influence our politics. But it is easy for politics to co-opt our faith whether we are progressive, centrist or traditionalist.

The United Methodist Church is made up of both liberals and conservatives, Democrats and Republicans, and a whole lot of people somewhere in between. As we’ve become more politically polarized, this polarization has spilled into the church. Sadly, instead of being a force for unity and showing how we can live together, we have followed the world’s lead in embracing division, the opposite of what Jesus prayed for his followers the night before his death. (John 17:11)

### **Breakdown of the Church’s Governance and Fight or Separate?**

Tom notes that some United Methodists in the United States have ignored the *Book of Discipline*’s prohibitions forbidding same-gender marriage and the ordination of LGBT persons who are otherwise qualified candidates for ministry. Consequently, he asks if it is better for traditionalists to remain and fight or to separate. I think this is a good question. Progressives have been asking this question for decades. Centrists, by definition, are willing to live within a church that embraces traditionalists and progressives.

My experience is that there are two kinds of traditionalists in The United Methodist Church when it comes to same-sex marriage and ordination of LGBT persons: 1) those who cannot continue in a church where any pastors officiate at same-sex marriage and where any annual conferences will ordain qualified LGBT candidates; and 2) those who feel they can remain in a denomination that allows for differences on marriage and ordination provided they are not required to violate their own convictions.

For those who believe that they cannot be in a denomination where any pastors, congregations, or annual conferences hold differing opinions and practices regarding same-sex marriage and ordination, Tom’s encouragement to separate is understandable.

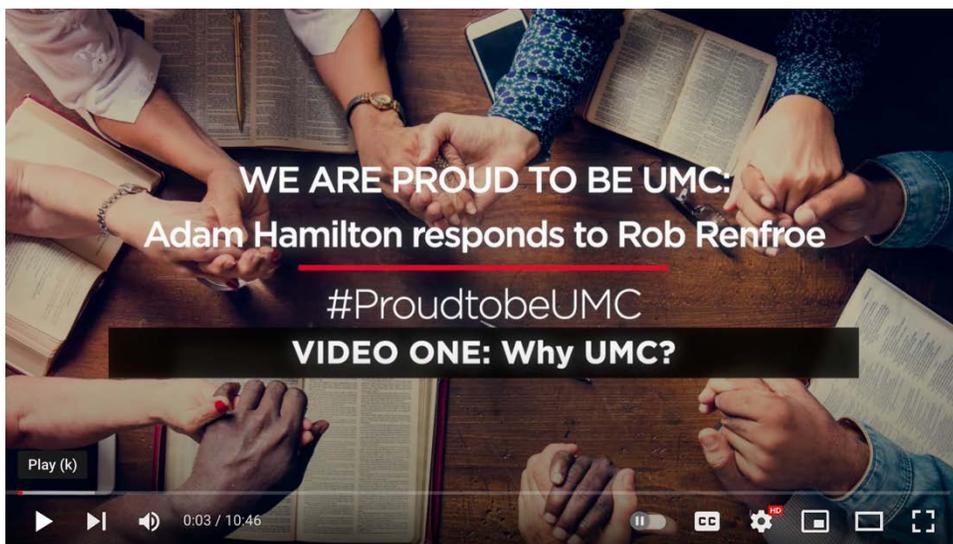
I’ve suggested that the deep divides that Tom sees between the two sides are, in the end, primarily about how we interpret scripture regarding same-sex relationships and how God looks

at his LGBT children. Lambrecht and others envision a new Methodist denomination that is clear that “the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching,” one in which same-sex marriages are not accepted or permitted, and in which qualified gay and lesbian candidates for ministry will not be ordained. This new movement would seem, therefore, to be a church exclusively for traditionalists.

Meanwhile, we envision that the United Methodist Church that continues after Lambrecht’s new movement forms, will include traditionalists, centrists and progressives. It will continue to embrace the historic essentials of the Christian faith as found in our current doctrinal standards. It will be a church that sees the Bible as our primary source for what we believe and how we practice our faith, interpreted with the aid of tradition, experience, and reason. It will be a denomination and movement that holds together evangelism and social justice as both essential to the mission of God’s people. It will offer authentic Christian community, opportunities to grow as disciples of Jesus Christ, and a connectional ministry by which we serve together as Christ’s hands and feet in mission both locally and globally.

But The United Methodist Church will be distinct from Lambrecht's new Methodism by removing the language and policies about the “practice of homosexuality” from our Discipline thus allowing pastors to determine who they marry and annual conferences to determine who they will ordain.

*Author of more than 25 books, the Rev. Adam Hamilton founded United Methodist Church of the Resurrection in 1990 and serves as its senior pastor. This post is republished with permission from his blog. He also has published a series of videos responding to similar claims made by the Rev. Rob Renfroe, president and publisher of Good News Magazine. Click on the photo below for the first video.*



# Protocol Negotiators Say Separation Pact 'No Longer Viable'

**By Cynthia B. Astle**

*United Methodist Insight Editor*

*Centrist and progressive United Methodists who helped negotiate the Protocol in 2019 now say that General Conference delays and the launch of the new Global Methodist Church have rendered the separation pact unworkable.*

A group of centrist and progressive United Methodists who helped negotiate the independent agreement to divide The United Methodist Church issued a statement June 8 saying they believe the document is "no longer viable" as a means of resolving the denomination's differences.

Representatives of UMCNext, Uniting Methodists, Mainstream UMC, the LGBTQ advocacy group Affirmation, Methodist Federation for Social Action and Reconciling Ministries Network posted the statement on a new website, [Protocol Response](#). The website includes an option for viewers to sign on to the statement.



The Rev. Tom Berlin (at right), lead pastor of Floris UMC in Herndon, Va., and a frequent spokesman for centrist United Methodists, told *United Methodist Insight* that the response was prompted by wanting to share information with the church about their constituents' current views on the Protocol.

"Centrist and progressive groups say we no longer support the protocol; it's unhelpful to have that info and not share it," said Rev. Berlin. "The church is in a time when everyone is discerning God's will for the future. When we put the response together, we thought it was important for General Conference delegates to understand what our groups were saying.

"Many delegates said they didn't support the Protocol and wanted to amend it," he continued. "A mediated agreement only holds if it is unamended."

"Now we're two years [after the Protocol was introduced] and it will be two years before the next General Conference," Rev. Berlin said. "Mediated agreements are negotiated at a moment in time and best acted on in that moment. If you don't act on it for four years, many of the conditions in the agreement will have changed."

The launch of the Global Methodist Church is one of the "changed conditions," Rev. Berlin added.

"The Global Methodist Church has now started, and churches are using Paragraph 2553 [to disaffiliate]," he noted. "If they desire they can join the Global Methodist Church, but many are simply becoming independent, or joining another denomination."

Rev. Berlin said the Protocol Response was not crafted as a reaction to a movement that is trying to substitute Book of Discipline Paragraph 2548.2, which provides for a simple transfer of property to another Methodist denomination, for the "gracious exit" of Paragraph 2553, which requires departing churches to pay annual conferences two years of apportionments and 110 percent of unfunded pension liabilities.

"Paragraph 2553 was proposed by a member of the Wesleyan Covenant Association at the 2019 General Conference," Rev. Berlin said. "It was supposed to be the 'gracious exit' and I assume it was thought to be fair and equitable at the time. I don't know why they now think Paragraph 2553 isn't equitable. It seems odd."

He said that the traditionalist groups that helped draft the Protocol were notified about the statement before it was released via social media. However, no representatives of traditionalist groups were part of the discussion of the statement, Rev. Berlin said.

Rev. Berlin also said that the Protocol Response wasn't consciously timed to be published during the 2022 U.S. annual conference season, but he acknowledged that the timing is fortuitous.

"During an annual conference season people talk a lot," said Rev. Berlin, whose church is in the Virginia Annual Conference. "I do know we've heard more concerns about where we will be in two years.

"The point is, this is a time when United Methodists are making decisions about the future. Many of us want to stay [in The United Methodist Church] and create the denomination we think God wants us to create. Others want to create other expressions of Methodism."

Rev. Berlin stressed that the groups which drafted the response aren't attempting to retaliate against traditionalists' actions.

"I hope people would understand that sharing this information is an act of goodwill," he said. "It's not an attempt to harm anyone, but to give people the information they need to make important decisions."

**Wesleyan Covenant Association President Jay Therrell responded to *Insight's* email invitation with the following statement:**

"The WCA is deeply saddened that with no consultation and little notification, that progressive and centrist signers and endorsers of the Protocol have chosen lawlessness and chaos over an orderly, amicable, grace-filled separation by withdrawing their support from the mediated agreement. This further erodes trust and pushes theologically conservative congregations to the place where they are required either to pay onerous and punitive exit fees or litigate their way out of the denomination. Things did not have to be this way. The WCA will contend for our churches and clergy."

The text of the Protocol Response follows.

**A Statement about the Protocol of Reconciliation & Grace through Separation**

In the aftermath of the 2019 Special Session of the General Conference and the subsequent crises it caused within the United Methodist Church, Bishop John Yambasu of Sierra Leone (now deceased) experienced a deep calling to bring healing to the denomination. Drawing on the relationships built over many years of leadership and ministry, Bishop Yambasu and other Central Conference Bishops convened a diverse group of church leaders representing centrist, progressive, and conservative constituencies within the Church.

Over time, this initial group solidified and became the unofficial mediation group that produced the [Protocol of Reconciliation & Grace through Separation](#). Facilitated by world-renowned mediator Kenneth Feinberg, Esq., the mediation team acknowledged the reality of irreconcilable differences in theology, biblical interpretation, and disciplinary practices within the UMC. Then, guided by a commitment to principles of amicable separation, the mediation group met over a period of six months and developed a mutually agreed-upon framework that proposed a special, time-limited pathway for churches wishing to disaffiliate from the United Methodist Church.

The Protocol Agreement was publicly unveiled in January 2020 and, shortly thereafter, its enabling legislation was submitted for consideration at the 2020 General Conference. What no one could have foreseen, however, was the sudden onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic, which locked down whole communities, disrupted domestic and international travel, and caused multiple postponements of the General Conference. One of the chief impacts of the pandemic for the United Methodist church will be that the Protocol Agreement first released in early 2020 will not be legislation considered until the postponed General Conference meets in 2024. By this time, four years will have gone by since it was originally proposed.

Out of a spirit of transparency, trust, and accountability, members of the mediation team have reached out to the organizations that initially supported the Protocol Agreement, General Conference delegates, and others within our broad constituencies. The overwhelming consensus among those with whom we spoke is that the once-promising Protocol Agreement no longer offers a viable path forward, particularly given the long delays, the changing circumstances within the United Methodist Church, and the formal launch of the Global Methodist Church in May of this year.

Moreover, [bishops and church leaders in the Central Conferences](#), especially in Africa and the Philippines, have consistently voiced serious misgivings about the Protocol and its potentially disruptive impacts in their geographical regions. Since the Protocol was first released, these initial misgivings have crystallized into firm opposition in annual conferences worldwide.

Given the growing opposition to the Protocol within the constituencies we represent, the dwindling support among General Conference delegates, and the serious reservations of Central Conference leaders, we can no longer in good faith support the Protocol of Reconciliation & Grace through Separation or work towards its adoption at the next General Conference.

We are profoundly grateful for the prayers, time, and sacrifices made by all those who contributed, directly or indirectly, to the development of the Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace through Separation. That effort represented an extraordinary convening process that engaged people of diverse geographies, backgrounds, and theological perspectives to think through the possibility of achieving amicable separation. While we can no longer endorse the Protocol Agreement and its enabling legislation as a whole, our organizations and constituencies continue their strong support for some of its most essential provisions, including:

A continued commitment to finding constructive paths for individual congregations to disaffiliate from the United Methodist Church using BOD ¶ 2553. We, therefore, implore bishops, district superintendents, and conference trustees to facilitate amicable departures after congregations pay their required pension liabilities.

A renewed dedication to acknowledging the historical role of the Methodist movement in systems of systematic racial violence, exploitation, and discrimination. We, therefore, urge the General Conference to allocate \$39M over the next two quadrennia to strengthen ministries by and for Asian, Black, Hispanic-Latino, Native American, and Pacific Islander Communities and ensure that Africa University can continue its vital work of training the next generation of leaders.

Continued abeyance on all administrative or judicial processes addressing restrictions in the Book of Discipline related to self-avowed practicing homosexuals or same-sex weddings through the adjournment of the first conference of the post-separation United Methodist Church.

As we move through this season of Pentecost, we continue to pray for the Holy Spirit to fall afresh on God's Church and lead us even deeper in the way of Christ,

Respectfully submitted,

**Mediation Team Members**

Rev. Thomas Berlin, representing UMCNext, Mainstream UMC, Uniting Methodists

Rev. Egmedio "Jun" Equila, Jr., Philippines Central Conference

Janet Lawrence, representing Affirmation, Methodist Federation for Social Action, and Reconciling Ministries Network

Rev. David Meredith, representing Affirmation, Methodist Federation for Social Action, and Reconciling Ministries Network, member of UM Queer Clergy Caucus

Dr. Randall Miller, representing Affirmation, Methodist Federation for Social Action, and Reconciling Ministries Network

### **Endorsing Organizations**

Neil Alexander on behalf of Uniting Methodists

Bridget Cabrera on behalf of Methodist Federation for Social Action

Ann Craig on behalf of Affirmation

Rev. Ginger Gaines-Cirelli on behalf of UMCNext

Rev. James Harnish, on behalf of Uniting Methodists

Rev. Mark Holland on behalf of Mainstream UMC

Rev. David Livingston on behalf of Mainstream UMC

Rev. Jasmine Smothers on behalf of UMCNext

## **The Centrist/Progressive Message to Traditionalists and Institutionalists**

***By David W. Scott***

The announcement that [the Centrist and Progressive negotiators behind the Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace through Separation no longer supported that legislation](#) was received as a major development in the on-going struggle for the future of The United Methodist Church. But to fully understand that announcement and its aims and implications for the church, one must look past a binary understanding of current UMC politics.

As I have argued before, [new issues in the UMC](#) have resulted in [a variety of coalitions and interest groups](#). To view UMC controversies as driven solely by a liberal/conservative dyad is an oversimplification, though one Americans are apt to make, given the shape of current U.S. politics.

In this particular instance, it is important to understand the difference between U.S. Centrists/Progressives and US Institutionalists, their interests, and the interests of U.S. Traditionalists. It is the dynamic among these three groups that is behind this announcement, though other groups outside of the United States are critically important for what will happen in its wake, as I will lay out in a future post.

To begin with, U.S. Traditionalists would like to leave the denomination and to do so as quickly, easily, and cheaply as possible. However, without the Protocol or any other plan of separation, quick, easy, and cheap exit paths are not universally available. Despite some negotiations this March between traditionalists and U.S. bishops, no universal exit path was agreed upon. This created a patchwork of different annual conference procedures for disaffiliation, some cheaper, some more expensive.

This left some U.S. traditionalists feeling “stuck” in the UMC, [as Tom Lambrecht put it in late April](#). Therefore, in early May, the WCA resolved to [continue to advocate within the UMC](#) for the Protocol and better exit terms generally for those traditionalists stuck in the UMC.

Traditionalists have blamed centrists/progressives for keeping them stuck in the UMC. To some extent, that may be fair. There are some centrists/progressives who are [stuck in conflict](#) and unwilling to let Traditionalists go without making them pay for the pain they’ve caused in the eyes of these Centrists/Progressives.

But a better read of the story would make a distinction between centrists/progressives, as represented by prominent pastors and General Conference delegates, and institutionalists, as represented by many U.S. bishops. These two groups have different motivations regarding a traditionalist exit, and that difference is key to understanding the announced withdrawal from the Protocol.

While there are some centrists/progressives that want to make traditionalists pay as they leave the denomination, the major force that is acting to keep traditionalists in is institutionalists, mainly in the form of bishops and cabinets. Institutionalists, as their name suggest, are motivated to protect and preserve the institutions of the church, including their financial health. They tend to be comfortable with the status quo.

Thus, institutionalists have a dual incentive to make traditionalist departure difficult and expensive: It protects the financial interests of the annual conferences to require significant payments or to keep on-the-fence congregations in the denomination to continue to contribute apportionments. And it also preserves the status quo as much as possible to keep as many congregations as possible.

Centrists/progressives, however, do not have preserving the status quo as their main goal. Instead, they would like to make changes to the rules and structures of the UMC (to create a “Next” UMC), and the continued presence of traditionalists in the UMC is [a hindrance to making those changes](#). Therefore, centrists/progressives have an incentive to let traditionalists go, though they also want to make sure that departure does not significantly damage the denomination in the process so that there is a sufficiently strong remaining church to lead into their envisioned new day.

This is where the Protocol announcement comes in. Centrists/progressives realized that, given the high costs they were being asked to pay in some annual conferences, sufficient traditionalists were likely to stay in the UMC until 2024 that it would reduce the possibilities for using that General Conference to focus on creating a constructive path forward for the denomination and would instead ensure a fight over disaffiliation that might likely fail to resolve the issue to anyone’s satisfaction.

This is the scenario that centrist/progressive delegates Rebekah Miles and David Livingston contemplate in [a UMNS commentary published the same day](#) as the announcement about the end of centrist/progressive support for the Protocol. Miles and Livingston argue that to avoid such a debacle, it is important for parties to recognize how bad their “best alternative to negotiated agreement” is. In other words, parties are much more likely to negotiate when they consider what might happen if they don’t.

In this context, the announcement of the end of centrist/progressive support for the Protocol is not necessarily a new development. That lack of support has been voiced behind closed doors for some time. Instead, making such lack of support public sends a message. The Protocol announcement sends messages from centrists/progressives to both traditionalists and to Institutionalists.

By publicly rescinding support from the Protocol, centrists/progressives are saying to traditionalists that they should seriously consider the possibility that they won’t get a better exit deal by waiting until 2024 and advocating for passage of the Protocol. Therefore, centrists/progressives are calling on traditionalists to either take the terms currently available or renegotiate apart from the Protocol.

At the same time, centrists/progressives are calling on institutionalists to allow iraditionalists to leave on minimally expensive terms. The Protocol announcement stated, “We, therefore, implore bishops, district superintendents, and conference trustees [i.e., Institutionalists] to facilitate amicable departures after congregations pay their required pension liabilities.”

Miles and Livingston summarize the dual message thus: “We believe that Paragraph 2553 provides a reasonable path for local churches to disaffiliate. United Methodist annual conferences should uniformly adopt the minimum standards in 2553. Excess demands by leaders in The United Methodist Church delay departures and increase hostility. At the same time, churches and clergy that plan to exit the denomination should use the existing processes to do so before it expires on Dec. 31, 2023. Promises by the Wesleyan Covenant Association to remain active in The United Methodist Church at least through 2024 increase hostility, undermine negotiations, and hinder them from focusing on their mission.”

Both traditionalists and institutionalists (in the form of the bishops) initially publicly rebuffed this message from centrists/progressives. In [a post for the WCA](#), Jay Therrell claimed the negotiators were acting in bad faith and then reiterated the usual traditionalist litany of ways they have been victims of evil centrists/progressives (including bishops). This response was to be expected. Traditionalists have spent so much time advocating for and defending the Protocol that they could not be expected to accept its death quietly.

On the other hand, the bishops involved in the Protocol [reiterated their public support for it](#). That announcement protects them from the criticisms of the WCA and allows them to preserve the status quo of the abeyance on church trials. At the same time, in its final paragraph, the announcement holds open the door to possible further negotiations among traditionalists, centrists/progressives, and institutionalists, without taking leadership in calling for such negotiations.

The real question is what U.S. traditionalists and U.S. bishops actually will do in response to this message from the centrists/progressives beyond their initial written responses. Will bishops decide (individually or as a whole) to let traditionalists go with minimal expenses? Will traditionalists be willing to take the terms of BOD Paragraph 2553 and exit by the end of 2023? Will both parties be willing to open up further negotiations with centrists/progressives?

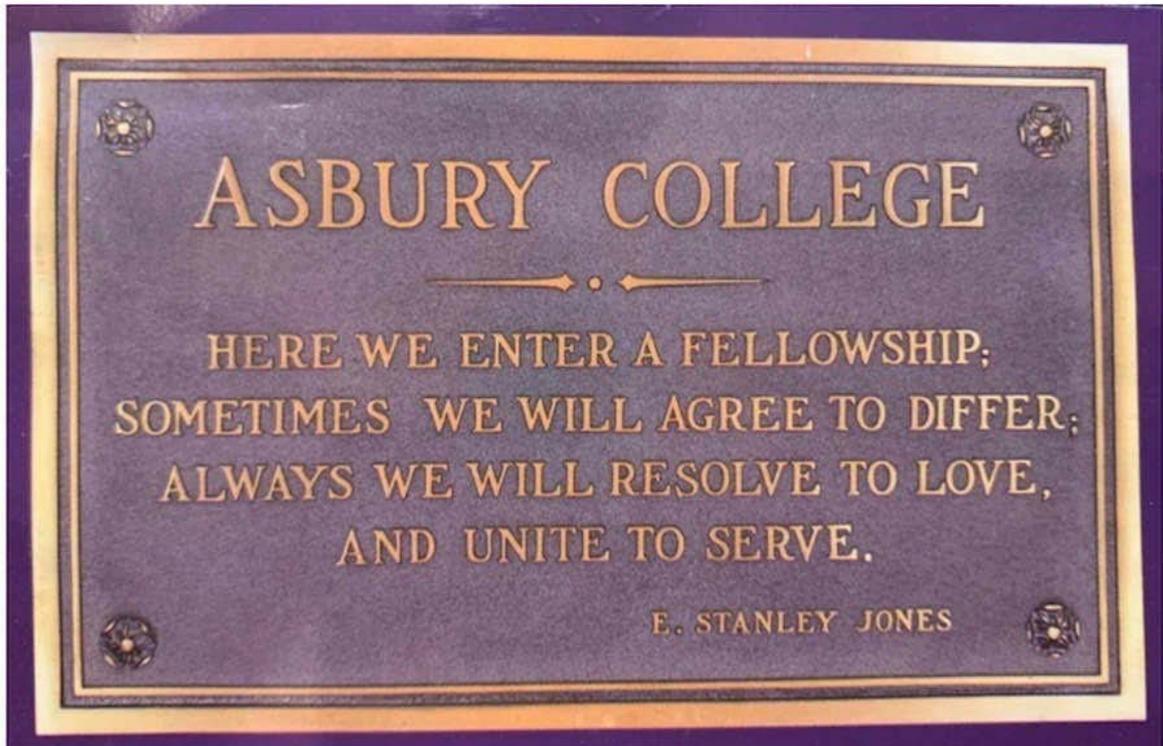
It is more likely, and easier, for U.S. disaffiliation to be resolved through compromises between institutionalists and traditionalists at the U.S. annual conference level. A negotiated compromise would require including not only the three U.S. groups described in this piece but also various groups from outside the United States. That process would be more difficult, but potentially yield additional benefits in terms of resolving questions about the church outside the United States.



*Dr. David W. Scott, a United Methodist layman, serves as director of mission theology for the General Board of Global Ministries, the UMC's mission agency. Dr. Scott contends that to fully understand the Centrist/Progressive withdrawal from the Protocol, its aims and implications for the church, one must look past a binary understanding of current UMC politics. This post is republished from UM & Global, the collaborative blog of United Methodist Professors of Mission, for which*

*Dr. Scott serves as blogmaster.*

## A Heartfelt Plea to the WCA: Stop Lying about the UMC



***By Mary John Dye***

These are very emotional days for me. I was so deeply touched by hundreds of birthday greetings I received this weekend. I was humbled at the wide array of people that wished me well. And, while sometimes it might be less challenging, I would not want my life to be lived in an echo chamber of people who agree with me on everything. I am grateful to love deeply people who disagree on a lot of things. I grow into holiness better with deep roots of faith and good will across a full spectrum of maturity and Christian insight. When we love as Jesus taught us, we help each other to be better, fuller reflections of Christ.

This wide range of friends is also an unspeakable heartache when people in the faith family are at war with each other. While the tendency of the world is to attack and insult others, that is not the way of Christ. In the church of my heart and my life, to say I don't know what to do is a daily heart-wrenching understatement.



# MYTH-BUSTING THE SPLINTER

## MYTH:

Churches must now vote to remain in The UMC or to leave with the GMC.

## FACT:

A number of more conservative pastors have told their congregations that there is currently a decision to be made: to stay in The UMC or to join the GMC. This is false on two accounts.

First, there is no present question before United Methodist congregations. Second, disaffiliation from The UMC does not require affiliation with the GMC.



I am fully ready to bless the friends and efforts dedicated to breaking from the United Methodist Church. I believe it will be healthy for them to devote their full energy in reaching others for Jesus without being consumed with constantly criticizing, correcting, attacking, gaslighting and disagreeing with others. The intense passion to tear others down disregards countless Scriptural admonitions against that very approach is a terrible witness. I pray that the launch of the GMC frees them from the quicksand of insulting and attacking others and lets them get back to a focus on loving God, the Golden Rule and the New Commandment, the prayer of Jesus for his disciples, Romans 12, I Corinthians 13 and Ephesians 4.

For all my WCA friends, I have a plea:

- Stop telling people that UMC pastors don't believe in the Bible.
- Stop telling people that UMC pastors don't believe in Jesus.
- Stop telling people that the UMC does not affirm the historic creeds of the faith.
- Stop telling people that the UMC has changed its doctrine.
- Stop telling people that there is no place for people with traditional beliefs and that all traditional pastors are going to leave the UMC.
- Stop the phone calls, emails and conversations saying that all UMC pastors will be required to perform same-sex weddings.

I have heard all of these in the last several weeks. When I am asked about those statements, there is nothing to say except they are all lies. They are falsehoods that discredit you. It makes me miserable to be in the position of telling someone that what they have been told is a lie. Sadly, I have been in that spot regularly in recent weeks. I beg you to stop spreading lies.



## MYTH-BUSTING THE SPLINTER

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### MYTH:

After WCA members leave to join the GMC, The UMC will no longer adhere to biblical principles.

### FACT:

This is a myth. According to our Book of Discipline, “the General Conference shall not revoke, alter, or change our Confession of Faith.” Our Theological Guidelines assert that we “share with other Christians the conviction that Scripture is the primary source and criterion for Christian doctrine.”

For more info, visit:  
[umc.org/en/content/theological-guidelines-scripture](http://umc.org/en/content/theological-guidelines-scripture)



And if you are not personally spreading them, know that the emails, the conversations, are shared in your name. You have showed no hesitancy in speaking publicly about the mistakes and missteps of others. Use your well-established voice and media savvy to rebuff these falsehoods. Distance yourself from them. Let the light of your integrity shine.

Tell people that you are deeply devoted Christians who are building a different structure of church. I will applaud and say “amen”. Tell people you believe a more congregation based system is more conducive to your evangelistic hopes. I will say “amen”. Tell people that based on your convictions, you are not able to support full inclusion of gay people in the life of the church. That would be an honest answer.

But please stop spreading falsehoods against me and other UMC pastors. You can’t build a church on the authority of God’s Holy Word and, at the same time, repeatedly violate the 9th

commandment and countless Scriptural admonitions. You are hurting yourselves and your witness. It breaks my heart.

Of all the multi-layer heartbreaks of life, some of them are beyond the reach of mine to fix. This one—which has faced me repeatedly over the past few weeks—is fixable by people I love and care deeply about. I pray you will steadfastly apply the core standards of evangelical faith to the formation of your new denomination so it can be a church that God can bless. A church where people will find and follow Christ. A church committed to truth and good will.

Somehow, by God's grace, a birthday is a good will window that opens up beyond the fray. I think that is a beautiful thing. A holy thing. And that wishing each other well and helping with our blind spots (in the spirit of love) is what we need more of. I cherish you, my dear friends across the full spectrum of beliefs and passions. I want what is best and what is healing and honorable and hope-filled for each of you. We need to figure this out. Not just on birthdays.



*The Rev. Dr. Mary John Dye's last appointment was as pastor of Triplett United Methodist Church in Mooresville, NC. She retired at the 2022 session of the Western North Carolina Conference after 48 years of UMC ministry. This post is republished with permission from her Facebook page.*

## UMC African Bishops Repudiate WCA, Africa Initiative



*Some of the African bishops pause for prayer and reflection during their September meeting at Africa University in Mutare, Zimbabwe. (UM News Photo. by Eveline Chikwanah)*

### ***From News and Staff Reports***

MUTARE, Zimbabwe – A majority of The United Methodist Church (UMC) bishops in Africa have condemned the Africa Initiative group and the Wesleyan Covenant Association (WCA) for spreading falsehoods about The United Methodist Church in Africa.

At the Sept. 8 close of their meeting at Africa University in Mutare, Zimbabwe, the bishops declared that they would have nothing to do with both the Africa Initiative and WCA as those two groups are now working for and promoting Global Methodist Church, a denomination that has not been approved by the General Conference of the UMC.

On Sept. 14, the Africa Initiative issued a four-page reaction to the bishops' statement. (See details below).

Absent from the list of endorsers was Bishop John Wesley Yohanna of the Nigeria Episcopal Area. For several years, Bishop Yohanna has been in conflict with a group of pastors and laypeople who have accused him of working to take the Nigeria Area into the Global Methodist Church. His administration currently is being reviewed by the West Africa College of Bishops, headed by Bishop Benjamin Boni of Cote d'Ivoire, because of multiple complaints lodged against him.

On Sept. 9, a loyalist group, Africa Voice of Unity, issued a statement supporting the bishops' action.

"We celebrate the courage of our African bishops who, in coming out to make such a bold statement, have declared their willingness to lead us in the United Methodist Church beyond the next General Conference," the statement read. "Their act of boldness is an example for all people of faith of what it means to embody one's faith and leadership with wholeness and integrity.

"We affirm the call of our bishops to the Africa Initiative to desist from maliciously spreading false information about the United Methodist Church with an intent of wooing United Methodists in Africa into the Global Methodist Church," the statement continued. "We call on all United Methodist Conferences in Africa to rally around our bishops as they lead the Church in Africa to a sustainable future we all desire to see as United Methodists in Africa."

*Read the full statement at the end of this article.*

A UM News article by Eveline Chikwanah of Zimbabwe reported the following reactions from Bishop John Wesley Yohanna of Nigeria and Jay Therrell of the Wesleyan Covenant Association:

Yohanna sent a brief statement by email to UM News, stating that while he respects his fellow African bishops' views, he continues to support the Africa Initiative and WCA.

"The Africa Initiative and Wesleyan Covenant (Association) are pushing for obedience to the Bible and the Book of Discipline. Why should we not associate with them?" said Yohanna, who did not attend the meeting. Yohanna is a member of the United Methodist Commission on Communication, which oversees UM News.

Jay Therrell, the WCA's president, said the advocacy group and sister organizations have long worked together with African leaders as equal partners, and the WCA's Global Council has leaders from across the African continent.

"We are deeply disappointed, but not surprised, by the statement purported to come from all the African bishops," he said. "We have been told the statement is not supported by all the bishops in Africa and lament that it insinuates that it is."

He added that the WCA believes "strong-arm control tactics by some African bishops infringe upon the Christian freedom of their members to speak into the current and future direction of The United Methodist Church and their role in it. We remain committed to working with theologically conservative Methodists across the continent of Africa to empower their witness to the faith and their right to make informed decisions about their future in the church."

The Africa Initiative issued a response Sept. 13 to the African bishops' statement. The Africa Initiative statement opens:

"However, we are shocked, surprised, and ashamed that some of our episcopal leaders (some have written to disassociate themselves from the allegations) would devote their valued annual gathering, not to address vital issues confronting the church in Africa, but on allegations against the Africa Initiative without making any inquiries of its leaders of their concerns. Contrary to the so said call for unity, they released a declaration of war. During the tenure of the late Bishop John K. Yambasu of the Sierra Leone Area, he always extended invitation to the leadership of the Initiative to the annual gatherings of the Africa College of Bishops to offer briefings. At such forums, episcopal leaders made inquiries of the Initiative's activities, and provided guidance. Contrary to that approach, the current leadership of the College of Bishops selected to discredit the Initiative and levy allegations without any due process, consistent with our Book of Discipline (BOD, 2016, Para. 2701-2719). This is unfortunate. Whatever the misunderstandings, we could have settled them around the "fire hart or under the palaver hut" where African elders and their subjects meet to settle their disputes. Instead, some of our leaders decided to go public with unauthenticated allegations."

The statement is signed by several Africa Initiative leaders including its general coordinator, the Rev. Dr. Jerry Kulah of Liberia. [Read the full statement.](#)

Here is the text of the bishops' statement, which can be [downloaded here](#):

## **STATEMENT FROM AFRICA COLLEGES OF BISHOPS**

**THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 8, 2022**

**AFRICA UNIVERSITY, MUTARE, ZIMBABWE**

Whereas we, the Bishops of The United Methodist Church in Africa, remain committed to the teachings of the Bible and to the doctrines of our Christian faith and heritage;

Whereas the Africa Initiative was created to advocate for African causes, issues and representation in The United Methodist Church agencies and gatherings such as the General Conference;

Whereas the Africa Initiative has lost its original goal of helping The United Methodist Church in Africa;

Whereas the Africa Initiative is now working with Wesleyan Covenant Association to destroy our United Methodist Church;

And whereas the Africa Initiative is working with and supporting the Global Methodist Church, a denomination that has not been recognized by the General Conference;

Therefore, we, the Bishops of The United Methodist Church in Africa, declare the following:

- We will dissociate from any activities of the Africa Initiative and will not allow any activities of the Africa Initiative in our areas.
- We will not allow or entertain any activities of the Wesleyan Covenant Association who are wrongly influencing God's people in our areas.
- We will not tolerate anyone giving false information about The United Methodist Church in our areas.

We will continue to be shepherds of all of God's people throughout our beloved continent.

Bishops present:

Bishop Eben Nhiwatiwa

Bishop Ntambo Nkulu Ntanda

Bishop José Quipungo

Bishop Daniel Lunge

Bishop Owan Kasap

Bishop Daniel Wandabula

Bishop Samuel Quire

Bishop Mande Muyombo

The statement is supported by other African Bishops who were not present:

Bishop Benjamin Boni

Bishop Gabriel Unda

Bishop Warner Brown

Bishop Joaquina Nhanala

Bishop Gaspar João Domingos

**In Support of the UMC Bishops of Africa Statement**

**From: The UMC Africa Voice of Unity**

September 9, 2022

Grace and peace of God be with all United Methodists around the world. This statement is being issued today, September 9th, 2022 by the Africa Voice of Unity, a United Methodist caucus in Africa working to ensure a sustainable United Methodism in Africa beyond the next General Conference. Africa Voice of Unity worked with Annual Conference, Central Conference and General Delegates in all Central Conferences in Africa to ensure the unity of our Church in Africa against a separation agenda.



We, the United Methodist members in Africa, unite today in support of the statement released on Thursday, September 8, 2022, by the bishops of Africa at the end of their meeting at Africa University in Zimbabwe repudiating the activities of the Africa Initiative and its association with the Wesleyan Covenant Association (WCA), purposely to promote the newly formed Global Methodist Church (GMC) at the expense of the United Methodist Church.

We celebrate the courage of our African bishops who, in coming out to make such a bold statement, have declared their willingness to lead us in the United Methodist Church beyond the next General Conference. We acknowledge their leadership of the church towards remaining in relationship with the United Methodist Church.

Their act of boldness is an example for all people of faith of what it means to embody one's faith and leadership with wholeness and integrity.

We agree with our bishops that the purpose in which the Africa Initiative was created was to help Africans participate in the general affairs of the Church with ease as their counterparts in Europe, Asia and North America. However, the Africa Initiative has deviated from its original purposes and is now working for Wesleyan Covenant Association in Africa. Therefore, it no longer represents the United Methodist Church in Africa.

We affirm the call of our bishops to the Africa Initiative to desist from maliciously spreading false information about the United Methodist Church with an intent of wooing United Methodists in Africa into the Global Methodist Church.

We call on all United Methodist Conferences in Africa to rally around our bishops as they lead the Church in Africa to a sustainable future we all desire to see as United Methodists in Africa.

Africa Voice of Unity is committed to working alongside our bishops to help them in providing leadership at this critical moment in the history of the United Methodist Church.

God bless our bishops and the entire United Methodist Church.

Signed:

Rev. Ande I. Emmanuel

**President, Africa Voice of Unity**

*This article was created with information from the Rev. Dr. Maidstone Mulenga, director of communications for the United Methodist Council of Bishops. Insight Editor Cynthia B. Astle contributed to this article.*

# Political Context and the Meaning of Church

*By David W. Scott*

Sept. 22, 2022 | ATLANTA (UM News)

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- **Key points:**
- **A pending separation and changing international composition find The United Methodist Church in a time of rethinking what it means to be a church, and a global church at that.**
- **Because of differing political and religious landscapes in the United States, Africa, Europe and the Philippines, United Methodists in those different regions have adopted divergent strategies to help the church succeed in the sense of attracting members and avoiding outside interference.**
- **Each of these strategies makes sense within the political and cultural logic of its context. The challenge comes when the church tries to come to agreement across contexts.**

The United Methodist Church aspires to be a worldwide church. Yet both because of the current separation happening within the denomination and its changing international composition, it finds itself in a time of rethinking what it means to be a church, and a global church at that.

“Church” is one of the most foundational terms used by Christians, but the meaning of that word may not be as universally agreed upon as one might expect. First, church can be used for three different levels of Christian gathering: local congregations, denominations and the church universal. The United Methodist Church is a church in the second, denominational sense.

While the nuances of theological understandings vary, there is at least an intuitive common meaning of congregation and the church universal: a gathered Christian community and the body of all Christians, respectively.

Not so with the other category. While most Christians could point to a denomination, they might be harder pressed to give a definition, and those definitions might vary widely. There are historical reasons for this uncertainty. Congregations have been a feature of Christianity since its beginning; denominations have not.

One might think of a denomination broadly as a middle level of church that unites local congregations and is a part but not the whole of the church universal, but this still leaves a lot of room for divergent understandings of how a denomination should go about uniting congregations and how it should interact with other denominations and broader society.

Moreover, the exact meaning of denomination is heavily influenced by context and the political and cultural factors at play in each context. Political contexts and their effect on the religious landscape mean that The United Methodist Church’s identity as a denomination means different things in different branches of the church.

Not only are there are different understandings within the denomination of what it means to be a “church,” but these different understandings go along with different strategies for how to be a successful church. Here, the notion of religious marketplaces — how religious groups behave in their social and political contexts to grow and thrive — is helpful. Even if talking about religion as a marketplace is inadequate theologically, it highlights issues of fit between an organization (such as The United Methodist Church) and its environment.

Because of differing political and religious landscapes in the United States, Africa, Europe and the Philippines, United Methodists in those different regions have adopted different postures toward political leaders and the general populace, part of divergent strategies to help the church succeed in the sense of attracting members and avoiding outside interference.

## **The United States**

The concept of denomination came into its own in the United States, fostered by the American principle of separation of church and state. In the United States, there is minimal government regulation of religion (most of what does happen is through tax laws), and religious identity is seen as a personal choice by Americans. That does not mean that Americans view faith as solely a private matter — there may be public and political implications of one’s faith — but ultimately, one’s choice of faith is minimally constrained by political or other public forces. The United States is thus close to a religious free market.

In the United States, The United Methodist Church (and its Methodist predecessor denominations) has functioned as a leading competitor in the denominational marketplace. American Methodism’s goal has always been to grow and appeal to the masses. Unlike other traditions (Mennonites, for example), Methodism was never content to be a niche player in the religious marketplace. At times, this has led to conflict or compromise (as in dropping early American Methodism’s opposition to slavery), but the goal has been consistent: to be a major denomination with an extensive membership.

Historically, American Methodism has been successful in achieving this goal. Methodism (across denominations) was the most popular variety of Protestantism in the United States at the end of the 19th century, and The United Methodist Church remains the second-largest Protestant denomination. It is the most nationally distributed of any major denomination, crossing all regions of the country.

The United Methodist Church in the United States has, of course, experienced a prolonged loss of members over the course of its lifetime. Yet part of what has made that experience so painful for U.S. members is because it represents the loss of a former dominant position in the American religious landscape.

There have been myriad proposals for how to reverse the membership decline in the United States, but they all have several features in common: They are focused on appealing directly to individual potential members, usually through the preaching and programming of the church. None of them address the denomination’s relationship with the government. While some of these reflect on the “brand” of United Methodism, very few of them talk about the role that the church plays in the public square. These strategies to retain and gain members are about appealing to individuals’ choices across broad swaths of the American public.

## **Europe**

The United Methodist Church functions very differently in Europe. Most of Europe has a long tradition of state churches supported by the government. In some instances, state support has recently ended, but the legacy remains. In that context, The United Methodist Church has functioned as a “free church,” that is, one that people freely choose to join (rather than doing so because it is the government-set default). Indeed, in several countries, Methodism helped pioneer the idea of religious freedom.

But free churches are necessarily small. The state church, as a government monopoly of sorts, will always have the dominant position in society. In such a setting, Methodism has never aspired to win over the masses, as it has in the United States.

Instead, The United Methodist Church has sought to avoid the stigma of a being a “sect,” a label that would bring popular aversion and possibly government interference. The goal is survival and ideally modest growth, but not becoming a dominant player in the religious landscape, which is not possible.

To avoid the label of “sect,” United Methodism tends to emphasize its ecumenical relations and its contributions to the common good. Both these habits demonstrate that the church is willing to get along with and benefit others, rather than being closed-off like a sect.

But this approach of being a good citizen is a very different model of engaging the religious marketplace than American churches’ appeal to the interests of individuals as free consumers. It is a different set of strategies with a different end goal.

## **Africa**

People might look at the lack of a state church in most African countries and conclude that they are free denominational marketplaces, as in the United States. Yet such a view misses two important points about how religion functions in most African contexts.

First and foremost, while religious identity in the United States is a personal matter, in most African contexts, it is a public matter. That is, one’s religious identity is not merely chosen independently as an individual but is instead connected to other elements of public and communal identity — family, tribe, political party, occupation, etc. In some instances, these communal aspects of identity determine denominational identity more so than personal choice.

Second, while freedom of religion does exist in almost all African countries, there still tends to be a heavily regulated religious marketplace. There are no state churches, but the government actively intervenes in religious affairs for a variety of reasons, sometimes personal to the leader but mostly related to the government’s understandings of good of the society, including preservation of social order. Because religious identity is public, the government has an interest in regulating it.

Thus, there are various instances of African governments interfering with religious organizations, including through permitting and legal cases. Churches also often seek to use state intervention, through government officials or the police, to resolve religious conflicts within their own body — something that an American church would almost never do, except in the instance of lawsuits, which are not seen as a form of government intervention.

The goal for The United Methodist Church in many contexts in Africa is still, as it is in the United States, to appeal to the masses. Methodism tends to be growth oriented, carrying the idea that all should be welcomed into the church and that a growing church is a healthy church.

But this growth is pursued in slightly different ways. Because religion is seen as public rather than personal, Methodism emphasizes not only the personal benefits of worship, community and spiritual care, as it does in the United States, but also how the church engages with and contributes to the overall good of the society, mostly through education and health care. In many places throughout Africa, Methodism is the church of civil society, engaged in building better communities. That is one of its prime selling points. This public image of Methodism both helps attract followers (as groups and individuals) and staves off government interference, though Methodism often ends up interacting extensively with the government around the public services that the church provides.

### **Philippines**

Unfortunately, in the interest of space, I will touch only briefly on the Philippines. It is probably somewhere in between the United States and Africa. There is a relatively free market for religion in the Philippines, a legacy of U.S. colonialism. Yet the government is more likely to curtail religious speech on political issues, and the Filipino religious marketplace is structured differently than the U.S. religious marketplace. One might think of it as an oligarchy: The Catholic Church and the United Church of Christ in the Philippines exercise dominant positions within Filipino society. Within that context, Methodism is a specialty religious provider characterized by education and healthcare, just as education and health care is central to the church's public face in Africa.

### **Conclusion**

The upshot of this variation among political contexts in which The United Methodist Church operates is that there are different understandings of what it means to be a "church" and different strategies pursued to be a successful church. To the extent that the church is characterized by regionalization, these divergent understandings and strategies can coexist. To the extent that the church is characterized by centralization, there is the potential for conflict among these strategies.

One instance of such implications for how issues play out in the denomination is around sexuality: In the United States, denominations must respond to changing demands in the religious marketplace in a society that increasingly accepts gay marriage, but where there is also a good portion of individuals with traditionalist understandings of marriage, thus leading to conflict about how best to appeal to the masses. In Europe, to avoid the label of "sect," there is pressure to follow majority opinion (whether conservative as in Eastern Europe or progressive in Western Europe). In Africa, it is important to be seen as contributing to social stability, and when the government has identified the heterosexual family as central to social stability, there is pressure for the churches to toe that line. In the Philippines, questions of sexuality are less relevant to Methodists' identity as a specialty religious provider focused on education and health care.

Each of these strategies makes sense within the political and cultural logic of its context. The challenge comes when the church tries to come to agreement across contexts.

*Dr. David W. Scott, a United Methodist layman, is the director of mission theology in the Office of the General Secretary at United Methodist Global Ministries.*

## WCA Churches Aren't the Victims in UMC Splintering

### ***A United Methodist Insight Editorial***

Let's get something straight right now: for all the Wesleyan Covenant Association's whining about disaffiliating churches being punished by annual conferences, they're not the victims in the tragic splintering of the 12-million-member worldwide denomination.

Instead, the WCA and its fellow travelers have been hoisted on the traditionalists' own spear, and they have no one to blame but themselves for the cost of leaving the UMC.

Like other American conservative political, religious, and cultural movements these days, the WCA would have us believe that it's being oppressed by a cruel dictatorship – the institutional United Methodist Church. The WCA's attacks often aim at easy targets, such as bishops in the conferences where the organization has duped traditionalist churches into thinking their only option is to leave the UMC.

In reality, it's the conference board of trustees, not bishops, who are setting any additional exit terms for disaffiliating churches, depending on the previously undertaken financial obligations of church and conference. Along with the finance committee, trustees take their fiduciary responsibilities seriously but not politically, and are requiring disaffected churches to hold up their ends of financial obligations.

Here's the kicker: The method by which most annual conferences are processing disaffiliations, Paragraph 2553 of the Book of Discipline, was proposed and enacted by the traditionalist delegates to the special called 2019 General Conference. Their strategy was that progressive congregations would take the so-called "gracious exit" and leave the spoils – the rich remnant of United Methodism – for traditionalists.

Boy, did that strategy backfire, big time.

Instead of progressives beating a path toward the door, nearly 75 percent of U.S. annual conferences overwhelmingly voted to reject the actions of the 2019 General Conference. Whoops!

Now the shoe is on the other foot, and it pinches.

That's why the WCA is pushing lawsuits to get out from under the trust clause, and why it's still promoting the so-called "comity" option of Paragraph 2548.2. Trouble is, the "comity" transfer of property requires that a) the church to which the property goes, and b) a "comity" agreement, both actually exist. In this case, the Global Methodist Church to which the WCA wants the UMC to cede its property is a paper denomination. What's more, there's no "comity" agreement between the UMC and the GMC, since only General Conference can approve such a pact, and General Conference won't meet until 2024.

Ergo, like a child throwing a tantrum because she can't have candy, the WCA is throwing a hissy fit about being victimized by its bad parent, the United Methodist Church.

What the WCA obscures in its ranting is that the payments being requested – the very "exit dues" that traditionalists themselves set up – aren't punishment for leaving the UMC. Quite simply, they repay seed money given to each congregation by the annual conference when the churches were founded. In other words, the WCA's "victim" narrative conveniently glosses over the fact that United Methodist congregations are founded with OPM – Other People's Money. Those "other people" are generations of faithful United Methodists who have given their tithes and offerings for decades because they believe in spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ through new spaces in new places.

Few United Methodists understand that their churches don't just spring up out of the ground. Nor do they understand that the "trust clause" – the agreement through which each congregation holds its property "in trust" for the annual conference – was instituted by John Wesley to prevent the very thing that is happening now. Wesley feared that local churches could be hijacked by political blocs or disaffected pastors who convince their flocks to leave the Methodist connection for supposedly greener heavenly pastures. It turns out Wesley's fear was justified.

In fact, Paragraph 2553 – which didn't exist until the special 2019 General Conference, remember – actually makes it easier for churches to leave the UMC. As Bishop John Schol of the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference [points out in an Aug. 18 letter](#): "Prior to the 2019 Special General Conference session, if a congregation wanted to leave the denomination it would have to forfeit its property or purchase full ownership of it. The Trust Clause in our Book of Discipline, paragraph 2501, like apportionments, is based on Acts 2:44 and 4:32 — '*They shared/had all things in common.*' Today, because paragraph 2553 was added to The Book of Discipline in 2019, congregations temporarily may leave with their property for a fraction of the cost."

It's clear that in their hunger for power and money to begin the Global Methodist Church, the WCA's leadership has cast traditionalist churches as the victims – much like other prominent figures who shall not be named – to keep the bucks rolling in. Deprived of the \$25 million proposed in the Protocol for Reconciliation & Grace through Separation to start a traditionalist denomination, the WCA has resorted to lawsuits and exhortations to withhold apportionments. WCA leaders don't seem to recall that for pastors and church leaders, paying apportionments is the local congregation's "first benevolence responsibility" according to the Book of Discipline. The WCA is urging congregations to violate the very church law it claims to uphold.

How much more transparent can the WCA's motives be?

This conflict has passed the point where money is most important. What matters now is the way the WCA's obfuscation and misdirection are undermining the UMC's ability to fulfill its mission for Jesus Christ, to say nothing of risking the vocations and fiscal health of the pastors and churches it's urging to disaffiliate.

**Don't be fooled. The WCA isn't the victim in the slow-moving landslide of UMC disintegration. They're the ones who pushed the first boulder down the hill, and now they're getting hit by their own stones.**



*A banner with UMC values from the Alabama-West Florida Conference website.*

## **A Living Hope: An Open Letter About the Future of the Alabama-West Florida Conference of the United Methodist Church**

**Republished from the [Alabama-West Florida Conference website](#)**

Grace and Peace to you in our Lord Jesus Christ,

We are leaders who love the Alabama-West Florida Conference of The United Methodist Church and are praying for its hope-filled future. We believe no institution or denomination is perfect, including the United Methodist Church, but this Church has called us, nurtured us, and brought us into connection with God's children of our conference and we will work to make it better each day.

United Methodists in southern Alabama and the panhandle of Florida have a wide variety of backgrounds and experiences, and each of us has found the grace of Jesus Christ in United Methodist Churches. For us, the UMC has been a lifeboat in a chaotic world. We are committed to preaching and teaching the faith that we proclaim weekly in the creeds of the church. We affirm the traditional Methodist view that scripture is the primary source and standard for Christian doctrine. Scripture is primary to our understanding of the Triune God, the world, and ourselves, and “contains all things necessary for salvation (Articles of Religion).” We are committed to “spreading scriptural holiness all over the land (John Wesley).” These doctrines are rooted deeply in our worship, our lives, and our Book of Discipline. These are not negotiable.

We believe in salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. In fact, a theology that is captivated with grace—prevenient grace, justifying grace, sanctifying grace, and the means of grace—is our Wesleyan distinctive. Salvation cannot be earned or rendered by human action, whether by being good or cutting ourselves off from those we deem bad. It only comes as a gift from God. We believe that God loves the entire world and sent Christ to die for its salvation. We endeavor to be the kind of people that lift Christ up so he can “draw all people unto himself (John 12:32).”

We are Wesleyan evangelicals whose mission is “to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.” Jesus is changing lives weekly in our churches, and as a result, we serve churches which are growing and witnessing regular professions of faith. We have church members who kneel side by side to take the sacrament of Holy Communion, knowing that they disagree on how best to live according to the example of Christ. They have chosen humility and loving service to God and neighbor over any issue that can divide them. And so have we. Therefore, we believe that the United Methodist Church is strategically positioned to reach the unchurched and those who are not already committed Christians.

God is not finished with The United Methodist Church. The Triune God who is making all things new is just beginning with us. The world does not need more denominations or church growth strategies. We need more of Jesus Christ and those willing to follow him. During this time of great division in the world, we are praying for revival and rebirth in our denomination. We are praying that the Holy Spirit will move anew in our time and do what the Spirit has done through the ages—bring us together, as on the day of Pentecost. Everyone is invited to be a part of this revival.

We will welcome conservatives, progressives, traditionalists, liberals—every single person—into a life changing relationship with Jesus.

We will commit to revitalizing all United Methodist congregations in the Alabama-West Florida Conference.

We will plant new churches to share the transforming love of Christ.

We will help women and men discern God’s call into ministry and equip them to lead these United Methodist Churches.

We will offer Christ to our communities. Our doors and hearts will always be open to those who long for a relationship with him and seek the refuge of his church, which Christ has opened to people of all ages, nations, and races.

We will love our neighbors, despite our disagreements about politics or scriptural interpretation.

We will proclaim and uphold the orthodox faith as contained in our [Articles of Religion](#) and [Confessions of Faith](#). We believe these truths are not negotiable and are a means of uniting us as one in Christ.

The diversity in our 12-million-member church, active in over 100 countries, can be overwhelming. United Methodism in California looks different from Methodism in Alabama, not to

mention Tanzania or the Philippines, but that is one of the things we love about it. John Wesley, when defining what a Methodist was, said there were two marks:

“A Methodist is one, who has the love of God shed abroad in his heart...And he accordingly loves his neighbour as himself.”

We in the United Methodist Church are committed to loving God and neighbor, and we hope that you will join us in our exciting United Methodist movement in Alabama-West Florida. This is who we joyfully and earnestly commit to be as United Methodists, all for the glory of God. Christ is our living hope.

## Held Together in Christ

### An Open Letter About the Future of the North Carolina Conference of The United Methodist Church

#### ***By United Methodist Forward NC***

United Methodism’s vibrancy has brought many blessings to our state, its communities, and across the globe. We represent thousands of people who have discovered a saving relationship with Jesus Christ, whether as cradle Methodists or as those who made their way into the church in adulthood.

We have connected hands and heart of faith, through every natural disaster, and have repaired or rebuilt thousands of homes for disaster survivors, over 3000 homes for Hurricanes Florence, Dorian, and Matthew. We have served tens of thousands of students through the decade-long ministry of Congregations for Children. Across the globe, we have built scores of churches, hospitals, and schools, and we sent the first United Methodist missionary to Africa.

As servants and leaders who love this church and who long for a hopeful future, we call you to join us in inspired witness to God’s great future. We celebrate a church that has increased our faith, confirmed our hope, and is working still to perfect us in love.

And yet we know that same church now lives in deep conflict—an experience the church knows all too well. Since the church’s beginning, when it has seemed impossible to find consensus, we struggled together in prayer and in love to be able to say “it seems good to the Holy Spirit and to us.” (Acts 15:28). And since Methodism’s earliest days, we share a commitment to holy lives, where what we believe animates how we live out the love of Jesus in our world.

In light of the Holy Spirit's continuing grace working in us, we reaffirm our calling to be Christ's representatives in this corner of our world, preaching our historic faith in God who became truly human for our salvation. Our preaching finds its source in scripture, our theological task, Articles of Religion, and the faith we sing in our hymns. These sources are not negotiable for us, now or ever.

We are disciple-making people who believe in Holy Scripture's primary authority as the witness to Jesus's resurrection from the dead as our sure hope in this life and the life of the world to come.

We are justice-seeking people who proclaim that God is reconciling all things together in Christ, the church's ancient message for today's world.

We are missional people who believe that our holiness is evidenced by how we work to care for all creation and God's beloved creatures.

We are committed, grace-filled people who believe that we experience life with the triune God personally and communally, through prayer and action.

As we look toward The United Methodist Church's future, we are committed to renewing these facets of our collective identity, and to following the Holy Spirit's guidance with generosity, humility, resilience, and welcoming joy. We recognize that our denomination is not perfect, and that we have a deep need for reparation, reform, and renewal. We mourn that some among us feel compelled to leave our denomination, and we pray that they find other homes where they can know the love of God and bear fruits of holiness wherever God calls them to be.

From this day forward, it seems good to the Holy Spirit and to us that we will work to welcome all people without qualification, hesitation, or restraint, into a transforming relationship with Jesus and his church.

We will preach Christ, risen and present, with our words and with our presence in communities from Kitty Hawk to Southern Pines, from Burlington to Wilmington, and all the places around and in between. It seems good to the Holy Spirit and to us that our doors are open to and our hearts ablaze again with love for the neighbors God gives us.

We will continue following Christ into hospital rooms and prison cells, into homes recovering from hurricanes and schools devastated by poverty and politics, and all the places where Christ goes ahead of us bringing hope and healing.

We will plant new United Methodist churches, new places of restoration and liberation, because it seems good to the Spirit and to us that works of piety and mercy should still be found in equal measure in eastern North Carolina.

Ephesians 4:15 says, "by speaking the truth with love, let's grow in every way into Christ." Unfortunately, there is much misinformation and misunderstanding being bantered about disaffiliation and what is next for The United Methodist Church. You can stay updated on the most accurate details on the [Conference Disaffiliation website](#). A resource entitled [You May Have Heard](#) is also available to directly address some of the claims and questions being posed around disaffiliation and the future of The United Methodist Church.

We offer ourselves as evidence that God is still calling people to spread scriptural holiness. We affirm that our work as United Methodist people is to offer and embody the saving, justifying, and sanctifying love of God. We affirm our commitment to lives of holiness, centered in the life

of Christ. Although we may not always think alike, we affirm that together with God's help, we will love alike—on earth as it is in heaven. We pray that you will join us in faithfully participating in God's great future and in being open to the Spirit's lively movement, in which there is always room to spare.

Signatories (668 as of Sept. 28, 2022)

[Read the Letter](#)

[Read "You May Have Heard" resource](#)

[United Methodist Forward NC](#)

**Editor's Note: We close this resource with the latest news articles from United Methodist News to give readers the latest reports on the status of disaffiliation discussions in the United States.**



*A large crowd at a June 13 Celebrate UMC-sponsored event at Huntingdon College in Montgomery, Alabama, rises in applause. Celebrate UMC, which formed in the Alabama-West Florida Conference, is one of a handful of grassroots groups that are making an affirmative case for The United Methodist Church as some congregations decide whether to leave the denomination. (Photo courtesy of Celebrate UMC.)*

## **Grassroots Groups Talk Up The United Methodist Church**

**By Sam Hodges**

Sept. 19, 2022 | UM News

### **Key points:**

- **In a time of church disaffiliations, some conferences have seen grassroots groups emerge to advocate for remaining in The United Methodist Church.**
- **The groups go by such names as Stay UMC, Celebrate UMC, That We May Be One, Arkansans Staying United and Abide South Georgia.**
- **Providing information and countering what they see as misinformation is a key goal for the groups.**

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The Rev. Cory Smith is a pastor in the Alabama-West Florida Conference, where more than a few traditionalist churches are poised to disaffiliate from The United Methodist Church and others are weighing their options.

But Smith is a determined leader of [Celebrate UMC](#), a group of Alabama-West Florida clergy and laity who are waving the United Methodist flag.

“The purpose of Celebrate UMC is to support, encourage and resource those who wish to stay in the UMC,” said Smith, pastor of Auburn United Methodist Church, in Auburn, Alabama.

Celebrate UMC sponsored a June 13 event at United Methodist-affiliated Huntingdon College, in Montgomery, Alabama. Some 400 people nearly filled the chapel to hear the Rev. Tom Berlin, a veteran General Conference delegate and endorsed candidate for bishop from the Virginia Conference — and a strong advocate for The United Methodist Church.

Smith considers that night a turning point for himself and like-minded members of Alabama-West Florida.

“There was great energy in the room because an event focused around staying UMC had not ever been hosted in our conference,” he said. “It was the launch point for a new narrative in our conference. Since then, clergy who wish to stay UMC have felt more connected and empowered.”

Alabama-West Florida is one of a handful of U.S. conferences seeing considerable discussion and action around disaffiliation but also the emergence of grassroots coalitions advocating for remaining in The United Methodist Church.

They have, in effect, stepped up to counter the messaging of traditionalist, pro-disaffiliation groups such as Good News and the Wesleyan Covenant Association.

In the North Alabama Conference, there’s [Stay UMC](#), which has been going since 2020 and has a robust internet presence.

“Our entire website is intended to persuade people to consider remaining in the denomination,” said the Rev. Steve West, a leader of Stay UMC and pastor of First United Methodist Church in Jacksonville, Alabama.

In the South Georgia Conference, there’s a recently formed group called [Abide South Georgia](#), which has launched its own information website.

Abide South Georgia, a grassroots group formed within the South Georgia Conference, has launched an information website advocating for remaining in The United Methodist Church. Logo courtesy the Rev. Jon Brown.

The South Georgians were inspired by Stay UMC.

“They really were the impetus,” said the Rev. Jon Brown, one of the Abide South Georgia organizers and associate pastor of Vineville United Methodist Church in Macon, Georgia. “We really liked what they did, but it seemed focused on their own conference. We said, ‘Well, what if we did our own?’”

The Arkansas Conference has Arkansans Staying United, which has a [Facebook page](#) with more than three thousand followers, and the Texas Conference is home to That We May Be One.

The latter group started in 2016 with the goal of promoting unity and understanding among conference members with different theological perspectives.

But these days, [That We May Be One](#) is trying to make sure accurate information and a pro-United Methodist perspective reach the meetings where hard decisions are being considered.

“What we’re mostly working on is trying to help churches who are in the discernment process,” said the Rev. Lindsay Kirkpatrick, pastor of Asbury (United Methodist) Church in Pasadena, Texas.

Kirkpatrick believes [#BeUMC](#) and other broad-based efforts to make a case for the denomination are vital but can’t substitute for local groups.

“What we have that they don’t is relationships,” she said.

No one disputes that The United Methodist Church is in a fraught season.

Decades of internal conflict, especially over how accepting to be of homosexuality, led a diverse group of church leaders to [propose a formal denominational split in January 2020](#). The Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace Through Separation would allow traditionalist churches to depart with their properties and form a new denomination, getting \$25 million to start.

But the pandemic [has postponed until 2024](#) the General Conference at which any separation proposal could be approved. Meanwhile, a traditionalist breakaway denomination, the Global Methodist Church, [began operating](#) earlier this year.

Churches wanting to disaffiliate can take advantage of Book of Discipline [Paragraph 2553](#), which allows them to be released from the denomination’s [trust clause](#) and depart with their properties — if they meet certain procedural and financial obligations. That opportunity expires at the end of 2023.

Since 2019, annual conferences have approved about 680 disaffiliations, according to a United Methodist News review of [U.S. annual conference reports](#), publicly available conference journals and the special annual conference sessions held so far. That represents a small percentage of the more than 30,000 United Methodist churches in the U.S.

Still, the conferences where the grassroots, pro-United Methodist groups are active tend to be seeing significant disaffiliation action.

The South Georgia Conference approved 62 church disaffiliation resolutions at an Aug. 20 special session. Alabama-West Florida expects to deal with about 30 when it meets in special session Nov. 12. The large Texas Conference, which has its special session on Dec. 3, reports that 71 of its churches have voted to disaffiliate.

There are about a dozen more [annual special sessions](#) scheduled this year for consideration of disaffiliation resolutions.

As many local churches continue to weigh their future, the grassroots groups seek to assure traditionalist churches that The United Methodist Church will continue to welcome and value them.

The groups also have been scrambling to share facts about the disaffiliation process and counter what they see as distorted representations of The United Methodist Church.

“We were aware that some churches were in the discernment process and were getting biased or incomplete information from either the pastor or lay leadership,” said West of Stay UMC. “We’ve taken it upon ourselves to offer some balance.”

The Stay UMC website offers original material, such as an [FAQ](#), as well as links to other sources, including from the North Alabama Conference. The group also has dispatched speakers when churches in discernment have requested a pro-United Methodist representative.

The website for That We May Be One provides [a wide range of resources](#), including a lengthy “UMC Mythbusting” document. The first section refutes the claim, made by some disaffiliation advocates, that The United Methodist Church is straying from core Christian beliefs.

Another section pushes back against the idea that churches considering disaffiliation need to act right away. That We May Be One stresses that 2553 is still operative for another 15 months, and the group says it’s exploring whether the Texas Conference could approve a resolution extending a financially gentle exit path beyond that date, to give churches all the time they need to make an important decision.

“In our opinion, there’s a huge sense of false urgency,” Kirkpatrick said.

Along with written information, That We May Be One’s site has video clips featuring pastors from the conference, but also the Rev. Adam Hamilton, pastor of the 15,000-member United Methodist Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kansas.

The group sponsored Hamilton in recent talks at Houston’s Chapelwood United Methodist Church and at First United Methodist Church in Lufkin, Texas.

After the Houston event, Hamilton posted this on Facebook: “Much larger crowd than we expected and a lot of enthusiasm for Christ and for the UMC.”

Have the grassroots groups’ work resulted in any churches steering away from disaffiliation?

The groups aren’t claiming that but believe they’re having an effect.

“There have definitely been some churches that have slowed their process,” West said.

Cory Smith and others in Celebrate UMC certainly feel they have helped shift the conversation in the Alabama-West Florida Conference. The group recently published an [open letter](#) that’s collecting endorsement signatures from clergy and laity and getting circulated on social media.

“We believe that no institution or denomination is perfect, including The United Methodist Church,” the letter reads, “but this Church has called us, nurtured us and brought us into connection with God’s children of our conference and we will work to make it better each day.”

*Sam Hodges is a Dallas-based writer for United Methodist News. Heather Hahn contributed.*

# Churches Discern Whether to Stay or Go

*By Jim Patterson*

Sept. 16, 2022 | UM News

## Key points:

- **United Methodists are tackling the question of whether to leave The United Methodist Church because of differences in theology and LGBTQ participation in church life.**
- **Some conservative churches may leave to be independent while others are considering joining the Global Methodist Church, which formed in May.**
- **Informational meetings, studies, notes from pastors, videos and one-on-one meetings are among the means of communication.**

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The pastors of two faithful North Carolina United Methodist churches have at least one goal in common when it comes to whether to leave the denomination over questions of sexuality and theology.

Myers Park in Charlotte and Wesley Memorial in High Point may be heading in different directions, but they both want to follow Methodism founder John Wesley's directive to "Do no harm."

"I decided a long time ago, we need to help each other end well in this process," said the Rev. Jeff Patterson, pastor of Wesley Memorial, a conservative congregation that is likely to leave The United Methodist Church. "If we don't have that commitment to helping each other end well and to find who they are in Christ, what we will have is a tendency to control, manipulate and intimidate.

"I'm trying really hard to stay away from that part of the spectrum."

At Myers Park, which is expected to remain in The United Methodist Church, the Rev. James Howell said he is looking for consensus rather than winners and losers.

"By the grace of God, we haven't had to vote." Howell said. "We haven't thought one nanosecond about leaving. ... We've talked a lot over time about being a big tent church, which is hard."



*A graphic created for the Mountain Sky Conference reflects its emphasis on mission and ministry over conversations about disaffiliation. Graphic courtesy of the Mountain Sky Conference.*

At Myers Park, the congregation is more concerned about making a difference where they are, rather than questions about sexuality, he added.

“(The congregation) kind of settled into who we are way back,” he said.

After decades of debate about the status of LGBTQ people in the church, General Conference was set to vote on a denominational separation plan in May 2020. After being rescheduled three times due to COVID-19, the denomination’s top lawmaking body now is scheduled to meet in 2024.

The delay led to the early launch of the Global Methodist Church, a new traditionalist denomination that has been encouraging United Methodist churches to disaffiliate.

A United Methodist News review of U.S. [annual conference reports](#) showed about 600 church disaffiliations since 2019 — a fraction of the more than 30,000 United Methodist churches in the U.S. More are in various stages working toward it. The General Council on Finance and Administration has begun [reporting disaffiliations](#), but their tally lags behind UM News’ data because of the way the information is collected.

After voting to disaffiliate, some churches — including [large Texas churches](#) — are discerning further about whether to join another denomination or remain independent.

Rhetoric around the split has heated up in recent months. There have been claims that The United Methodist Church is moving toward denying the virgin birth and the divinity and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Several bishops have stepped forward to deny such charges, most prominently Council of Bishops President Thomas J. Bickerton during an Aug. 22 address to his fellow bishops. Bickerton also leads the New York Conference.

[Bickerton decried](#) what he called “a constant barrage of negative rhetoric that is filled with falsehood and inaccuracies” coming from backers of the Global Methodist Church.

As in North Carolina, many United Methodist churches across the country are working to address the question of disaffiliation in less divisive ways. Informational meetings, notes from pastors, surveys and studies, videos and one-on-one meetings are among the means of communication.

“We knew that some churches would want to disaffiliate, and we wanted to make that process as grace-filled as possible” said the Rev. Jessica Rooks, district superintendent for the Mile High Metro District in the Mountain Sky Conference. “We wanted belonging and connection to be our focus, which is why we launched the ‘Belong’ campaign.

Resources on conflict resolution

Here are two books that can be helpful to United Methodists as they undergo the discernment process:

[“High Conflict: Why We Get Trapped and How We Get Out,”](#) by Amanda Ripley. Ripley examines what happens when discord distills into a good-versus-evil kind of feud, the kind with an “Us” and a “Them.”

[“Let’s Talk About Hard Things: The Life-Changing Conversations That Connect Us”](#) by Anna Sale. Part memoir, part how-to and part collection of personal stories, “Let’s Talk About Hard Things” is about how and why to have difficult conversations.

“We put our focus on the mission and ministry of who we are, rather than on the conversations about splintering.”

So far, only a handful of churches are undergoing the disaffiliation process in the Mountain Sky Conference, Rooks said.

Along with localized efforts, the conference has broadly distributed a [video](#) with the theme of “Belonging.”

“We’ve blanketed that everywhere,” Rooks said. “We’ve tried to send it to local churches, to different leadership bodies, to lay leaders, to clergy. ... It’s on social media. It’s on our website.”

Rooks has also personally delivered a sermon on the topic of “Belonging” to many churches under her purview.

The Rev. Laura Brantley, a former pastor at Brentwood United Methodist Church south of Nashville, who was a member of its discernment team, has advised pastors from Tennessee, Alabama and Georgia on the process.

“The first thing I do is try to help them broaden their scope of what they’re trying to discern,” she said. “It usually ends up being something more akin to, ‘Who is God calling us to be as a church in this particular time, in this particular context that we find ourselves in?’”

At Brentwood, the discernment process got underway in 2015 with “a year-long study focused on scripture interpretation, seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit through prayer and conversation with subject matter experts, including theologians, bishops, doctors, psychologists, gay and lesbian individuals and others,” according to a document titled [“Discernment Team Proposal & FAQ,”](#) which is available at the church [website](#).

Other steps in the process included:

Offering a four-week course for interested church members about homosexuality, marriage and ordination;

Having the discernment team attend the 2019 Special General Conference in St. Louis, the UMCNext meeting [in Kansas City in spring 2019](#) and the Wesley Covenant Association meeting [in Oklahoma in November 2019](#);

Establishing a larger discernment team comprised of lay and clergy leaders to make a recommendation regarding disaffiliation to the church council.

“The discernment team engaged in nine months of intensive work that included study, prayer, listening sessions and holy conversation,” the report read. “Our intent from the beginning and above all else was to listen to the movement of the Spirit. When we began our work, there seemed to be uncertainty about the best way forward, but by the time we had completed our work, we arrived at what seemed to us to be a Spirit-led alignment in our recommendations.”

At the end of the process, the discernment team recommended that Brentwood remain a United Methodist congregation.

“Within our own community, we had people that were on both ends of the spectrum,” Brantley said. “And we were constantly making sure that they weren’t stereotyping each other in unhelpful or inaccurate ways.”

Brantley said one key to Brentwood’s process was “to think the best of people even if they don’t agree with you.”

“If we don't agree with each other, we’ve got to be OK with that, but still love each other and still respect each other and not demonize (anyone).”

*Jim Patterson is a UM News reporter in Nashville, Tennessee.*

## **More on disaffiliations**

[Ask The UMC](#), a ministry of United Methodist Communications, has published a series of articles to correct misinformation related to disaffiliation and the future of the church.

Read [Part 1 on theology and pensions](#)

Read [Part 2 on human sexuality](#)

Read [Part 3 on Paragraph 2548.2](#)

Read [Part 4 on membership questions](#)

# Church Court Makes Impact

By Heather Hahn

Sept. 28, 2022 | UM News

As the bishops met in August, The United Methodist Church's top court issued a landmark ruling that could have implications for lawsuits over church property in U.S. civil courts.

In [Decision 1449](#), the Judicial Council ruled out the Book of Discipline's [Paragraph 2548.2 as a pathway for congregations to disaffiliate](#). Instead, the church court pointed to another disciplinary provision — [Paragraph 2553](#) — as the way for congregations to leave with both members and property.

The 2019 special General Conference — the same assembly that reinforced the denomination's bans on same-sex marriage and noncelibate gay ordination — enacted Paragraph 2553 with the express purpose of “Disaffiliation of Local Churches Over Issues Related to Human Sexuality.”

Paragraph 2553 requires departing churches to meet [certain procedural and financial obligations](#) — namely paying at least two years of apportionments and a share of their annual conferences' unfunded clergy pension liability. The church law expires on Dec. 31, 2023.

The impact of the recent Judicial Council decision “is straightforward,” said Thomas Starnes, chancellor for the Baltimore-Washington Conference, who had filed a brief before the church court. Chancellors are attorneys who represent United Methodist annual conferences.

“Any local church's disaffiliation must satisfy the minimum standards imposed by the General Conference in Paragraph 2553,” he said. “In other words, the decision forecloses the notion that the Discipline provides some ‘end-around.’”

The version of Paragraph 2553 that General Conference approved was substitute legislation proposed by traditionalists. At the time, many United Methodists assumed it would be mostly LGBTQ-affirming congregations leaving the denomination.

However, for the most part, it has been traditionalist churches seeking to exit. And since the launch of the Global Methodist Church in May, many of the new denomination's backers — including the Wesleyan Covenant Association — have decried Paragraph 2553 as too onerous, [especially since it gives annual conferences leeway in setting church exit terms](#).

The Rev. Jay Therrell, association president, said 19 conferences are “adding even more requirements and financial payments that make it out of reach for most churches.”

He also objects to the funding required by another provision the 2019 General Conference overwhelmingly approved — [Paragraph 1504.23](#), which specifies that “market factors similar to a commercial annuity provider” will be used in determining pension liabilities no matter how a church departs. Therrell said calculating pension obligations on a market basis rather than funded basis leaves annual conferences overfunded.

The Wesleyan Covenant Association and other Global Methodist Church backers have pushed for annual conferences to use Paragraph 2548.2 as an alternative. The disciplinary provision allows an annual conference to direct the local church trustees to deed property to another denomination that already has an existing agreement with The United Methodist Church.

No such agreement exists with the Global Methodist Church. The Judicial Council also ruled that Paragraph 2548.2 only applies to property and not membership.

After the Judicial Council decision's release, Therrell [released a video](#) expressing the association's disappointment. "If it is at all possible to use 2553, then do so," he told churches considering disaffiliation. However, he said, churches that find the obligations too burdensome "may have to engage in a legal strategy."

That is already happening in some corners. In July, 106 churches joined in a civil lawsuit filed against Florida Conference leaders, [demanding the conference use Paragraph 2548.2 to transfer the disaffiliating congregations to the Global Methodist Church](#).

The National Center for Life and Liberty, a non-Methodist legal nonprofit, is representing the churches in the Florida lawsuit and has since sent letters to other conferences threatening legal action on behalf of disaffiliating churches if the conferences don't use Paragraph 2548.2.

Therrell, a member of the Florida Bar, told UM News he receives no remuneration for the National Center for Life and Liberty but has served in an "of counsel" role completely pro bono to advise the nonprofit on the polity of The United Methodist Church.

Therrell referred questions about the lawsuit and threatened legal action to Jonathan Bailie, the center's chief operating officer and chief financial officer. Bailie has not answered UM News' requests for comment.

United Methodist chancellors say the Judicial Council ruling could have an impact on civil courts.

"In the Florida litigation, especially, it will strengthen the church's position, since that state is a 'deference' state," said George "Buzzy" Anding, Louisiana Conference chancellor and president of the United Methodist Church Conference Chancellors Association.

"That means the Florida court will give deference to the Judicial Council's determination of church law."

Bishop Kenneth Carter, who leads the Florida and Western North Carolina conferences, issued a letter saying the Florida Conference [would now seek the dismissal of the ongoing lawsuit based in part on the Judicial Council decision](#).

"Still, amid this new clarity, we also want to make one thing clear on behalf of the Florida Conference: Within the bounds of Paragraph 2553, we extend an open hand of friendship to those churches and leaders seeking to disaffiliate," Carter said in the letter.

*Heather Hahn serves as assistant news editor for UM News.*

## Send Us Your Feedback!

Was this resource booklet helpful to you and your congregation? Email your comments on how you experienced this resource to [um-insight@as-tex.net](mailto:um-insight@as-tex.net) with "Parting Ways" in the subject line.

Thank you!